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People and Parks.

**Understanding the role of communities in
improving urban green spaces for
health: success factors, challenges and
inequality implications**

Jenny Woodward

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Leeds Beckett University for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

School of Health, Leeds Beckett University

May 2024

Abstract

Title: People and Parks. An exploration of how communities and local authorities can work together to improve urban green spaces for health.

Award: PhD

Author: Jenny Woodward, MSc

Background. This research aimed to explore how Friends Groups work with local authorities and other partners to ensure their local urban green spaces are a well maintained and utilised amenity for public health. Good quality green space, close to where people live, improves health and wellbeing yet, in deprived areas with worse health, there is less access to this health-promoting resource. Improving green space in these areas could help tackle health inequalities.

Friends Groups, local people who act together to improve their local green space, are a growing phenomena. There is a lack of evidence however regarding how they develop and are sustained, especially in deprived areas, and whether relying on them contributes to or mitigates against inequality.

Methods. This study utilised qualitative methodology, influenced by ethnography. Seven case studies, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, participated: five established Friends Groups and two developing. Data collection included participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and 'walk and talks'. Developing group data was collected longitudinally, over three years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local authority park staff. Analysis was initially by case to produce narrative accounts, and then cross-case to identify explanatory success factors.

Results. A conceptual framework was developed that identifies four domains affecting the success, or otherwise, of Friends Groups: Place, People, Process and Power. Each domain identifies the most pertinent factors influencing group development and sustainability.

Leaders play a key role. Commitment, perseverance and motivation are vital whilst being confident, capable, with authority and connections improves chances of success. Place

also affected success. Groups operating in informal spaces found it harder to become established than those in traditional parks. Having formal structures, regular activities and in-built sociability helped groups succeed.

The relationship between local authorities and Friends Groups was often challenging, with conflict and disagreement leading to frustration and stress. Different perceptions of participation and control contributed to tensions. Parks teams were often unaware of issues relating to inequality.

Implications. This study raises concerns that, as the model currently operates, it could exacerbate green space inequalities. Deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to have leaders with the required qualities and connections for success, and parks teams show a preference for working with more capable groups, who are likely to be in more affluent areas. Recommendations centre on supporting Friends Groups in disadvantaged areas to strengthen capabilities and working with local authorities to encourage greater sharing of control.

Student's Declaration

I hereby confirm that this thesis is my own work. The thesis, or any part thereof, has not been previously submitted for any degree or comparable award

[Name and signature redacted]

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Studying for a PhD has been a privilege in many ways. I have learnt a great deal and met many remarkable people. But, doing this whilst working and raising a family has been, at times, challenging! I would not have reached this point of completion without the help of many people around me. So, thank you to everyone who contributed directly and indirectly.

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List of Acronyms

ABCD	Asset-based community development
APSE	Association for Public Service Excellence
ASA	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth
CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
CO	Community organisation
CSGI	Community-scale green infrastructure
EECA	Environmental enhancement and conservation activities
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
IMD	Index Multiple Deprivation
LGA	Local Government Association
LSOA	Lower layer Super Output Area
MENE	Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment
MSOA	Middle Super Output Area
NFPGS	National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces
NHS	National Health Service
PHE	Public Health England
ONS	Office National Statistics
UK	United Kingdom
UGS	Urban green space
WHO	World Health Organisation

Prologue

The idea for this study came to me whilst cycling to work along a canal tow-path. I had been contemplating studying for a PhD for a couple of years but lacked a specific idea. I knew it would be in health promotion, as I was committed to its ideals, but a topic that was right for me and relevant academically had not yet emerged. As I cycled along, I suddenly knew, with almost complete clarity, that I wished to study Friends of Parks Groups. I wanted to know how they operated, what type of people were in them, and their impact on society and on inequalities. Whilst the genesis of the idea felt sudden, when I reflected back, various influences had led to it.

Professionally I was (and still am) a researcher at the Centre for Health Promotion Research. A key value of health promotion is recognising the role of the physical, cultural and social environment in determining health (World Health Organisation (WHO), 1984; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). Yet much of the work I was involved in focused on initiatives aimed at encouraging or supporting individuals to improve their health by making lifestyle changes, within their current circumstances. Whilst such initiatives have an important role, for my PhD, I wanted to move 'upstream,' away from focusing on individual lifestyles to examining the wider determinants of health.

I chose green space, and access to it, as a specific topic, partly because it is a passion of mine. I spend a great deal of time enjoying the outdoors and am a non-executive Director of a social enterprise that aims to connect people to nature, in their local green spaces (Get Out More, undated). In addition, recognition was growing within academia of the importance of green space for health, especially in deprived areas (WHO, 2016).

More specifically, I had recently become aware of Friends Groups and their role in improving green space, as I had seen a local park be transformed by just such a group. What had once been a dark, overgrown, almost secret park, visited only by locals and dog walkers, had become a well-maintained, beautiful space much visited and used for community events. A group of committed local people had researched its history, set up task groups, involved local people and lobbied for funds and local authority resources. I greatly admired them and appreciated their work, but it also raised questions for me as to how equitable this approach was. This park is in an affluent area of town (within a deprived local authority) and the Friends were capable, motivated people. What about parks that do not have such a strong community? What is the effect of having an effective Friends Group in one area, on parks and green spaces in other less affluent areas, with less effective residents? Was it raising expectations that other communities might not be

able to fulfil? Are they adding resource to over-stretched local authority parks teams, so they could focus elsewhere, or is it drawing resources away from areas with less assertive, capable residents? In effect, were they increasing or decreasing inequality in terms of green space?

I had my own experience of 'active citizenship'. A few years before, some friends and I were asked by the local authority to set up a group to reduce dog-fouling in our town (we had previously petitioned them on related issues). We therefore set up a community group that aimed to change attitudes to dog-fouling. We carried out activities including asking dog owners to sign a pledge (over 250 did), delivering school assemblies and community talks, running poster campaigns etc. with the neighbourhood team supporting us with funds and officer time. The group was very successful; fouling reduced dramatically and complaints went down by 50%. We received 'community hero' awards and often spoke at events to encourage other similar groups.

Being an active citizen was rewarding, I gained friends and felt more connected to the local area. It changed how I felt about my neighbourhood - before I had felt quite negative about the lack of care shown, and the seeming impossibility of changing this but, by talking to others, I realised many people felt the same and that, by acting together, things could be improved. At the same time, it raised questions for me. Why do some people choose to get involved in local action, and others do not? People would sometimes say things like *"it's not our job, it's the councils"* or *"I pay my council tax so shouldn't have to do it"*. We would explain our reasons for acting and why the local authority could not do it all, but part of me wondered if they did have a point. By doing this were we letting local authorities 'off the hook' and covering up the impact of government funding cuts? And would our actions put pressure on other communities that might not have the same capabilities? Our contact would sometimes hint at differences of opinion within the local authority, as they switched from responding to demand to asking residents to do more. Were we causing resentment and taking jobs away from paid staff?

Choosing this topic was also about focusing on positives, it was about seeing people trying to do good things in their community and improve the local area. Much of the work I was involved in professionally focused on communities with very difficult life circumstances, and this could be personally draining. This type of work absolutely needs to be done but having time to explore positive actions and outcomes was uplifting and life-affirming. Overall therefore, I chose to study Friends Groups as I believed in the importance of green spaces and active citizens as health promoting assets (Hopkins and

Ripon, 2015). Yet I had questions about their role, how they operated, their transferability between communities and the impact on inequalities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the study and the thesis document. After some initial context on the importance of urban green space and the issue of UK health inequalities, the rationale for the chosen topic is provided. This demonstrates that urban green spaces are increasingly recognised as a contributor to public health and have a role in tackling health inequalities. It is shown that there are substantial issues funding the maintenance and care of this resource, and Friends Groups, consisting of community volunteers, are seen as a way of addressing this. Yet, despite there being approximately 5900 UK Friends Groups, providing an estimated £70 million worth of labour (Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), 2016) there has been relatively limited academic research exploring the phenomena. This chapter then clarifies the focus of the study, detailing its aims, objectives and scope. A summary of the thesis contents concludes.

Background

People and parks

Parks are an integral part of people's lives. Over half (57%) the UK population, and 90% of families with young children, visit an urban green space monthly (HLF, 2016). Urban parks and green spaces are the most common type of natural environment visited, comprising 52% of total visits (approximately 2 billion visits annually), increasing by 11% between 2009 and 2019 (Natural England, 2019) and still further during the 2020 pandemic (Office National Statistics (ONS), 2021). Visits to the countryside are fewer (36% of total) and declining.

People care passionately about their parks. A petition calling for greater protection was signed by 322,000 people and the resulting parliamentary inquiry received more evidence submissions than any previous (House of Commons, 2017). People use their parks for exercise, relaxation and reflection, to see nature, to play and spend time with friends (WHO, 2016; Natural England, 2019). They provide character to an area, are a place for communities to gather, improve bio-diversity, help mitigate flooding and bring economic benefits (The Parks Alliance, 2020).

Health inequalities

Understanding health inequalities explains the study's focus on deprived areas. Defined as *“unfair and avoidable differences in health across the population and between different groups within society”* (NHS England, 2023), health inequalities are a matter of social justice and tackling them essential for a healthy society (Marmot, 2010). Life expectancy and years living disability-free correlate strongly with neighbourhood deprivation; people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods have, on average, seventeen less 'healthy' years and seven years lower total life-expectancy, than those from the most affluent. (Marmot, 2010).

The causes of health inequality are multi-factorial, with the wider social, physical and cultural environment playing the major role *“where we live and who we live with affects our health, over and above our own individual circumstances”* (Buck and Maguire, 2015, p10). This was part of the rationale for moving public health from the NHS to local authorities in 2013, as they are able to affect the wider determinants of health such as housing, the environment and education.

Tackling inequality is possible. When this was prioritised, between 2006-10, inequality reduced (Buck and Maguire, 2015) however 'austerity,' introduced in 2010, led to inequalities increasing again (Marmot et al., 2020). Budget cuts were *“regressive and inequitable”* with local authority spending per person reducing by 31% in the most deprived neighbourhoods, compared to 16% in the least deprived, resulting in the loss of vital community assets (Marmot et al., 2020, p5).

Seven policy objectives to tackle health inequalities were recommended by the Marmot review of inequalities in England (2010). One was to *“create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities”* to benefit people across their life-course. In recognition of their important role in health (see next section) a specific recommendation was to improve the availability of good quality open and green spaces, across the social gradient. Recommended approaches to ensuring change included integrating systems so that the government, the NHS and the voluntary sector work more closely together and empowering communities to take greater control of their lives (see Chapter 4). To achieve this, barriers to participation need to be reduced and some communities need support to develop their capacities and capabilities (Marmot, 2010).

Green space and health

Whilst the importance of urban green space for health and wellbeing has been recognised for generations (Boone et al., 2009; Conway, 1991), in the last 15-20 years the scientific evidence base has strengthened considerably (Lovell et al., 2018). Public Health England (PHE) say there is now *“increasingly compelling evidence showing that access to green spaces really matters for our health”* (2020, p10).

Good evidence linking green space exposure to the following physical health outcomes exists; self-assessed general health, cortisol levels, cardiovascular health, type 2 diabetes and maternal birth weight, and some evidence links it to mortality, weight / obesity and physical activity. In terms of mental health, higher levels of green space lead to improved quality of life, mental wellbeing, life satisfaction and resilience and reduced depression, anxiety and fatigue (PHE, 2020). Spending two hours a week in green space is a sufficient ‘dose’ to improve health and wellbeing, with the difference this makes equivalent to being physically active or a person’s socio-economic status (White et al., 2019).

Critically, many of these benefits are greater for deprived groups or those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A recent systematic review found that those with a lower socio-economic status experience greater physical health benefits from green space than more affluent people, and that public green space has a stronger effect than green land cover (Rigolon et al., 2021). Greener living environments were found to be associated with reduced health inequality (especially wellbeing) in a review by Lovell et al. (2018), by mediating the effects of long-term deprivation. A population study found that living in a greener area reduced mortality inequality from an incidence risk ratio of 1.93 to 1.43 i.e. significantly flattening the inequality curve (Mitchell and Popham, 2008). This growing evidence base led to PHE concluding that improving access to green space is an *“important part of the wider plan to reduce health inequalities locally”* (2020, p13).

The evidence base is more developmental in how the impact varies depending on the type and attributes of the green space, and people’s own cultural and personal backgrounds (Markevych et al., 2017; Lovell et al., 2018; White et al., 2019). Studies examining these important nuances include ‘Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature’ (iwun, undated).

Four main pathways connect green space to health and wellbeing (PHE, 2020). It promotes healthy behaviour e.g. physical activity, improves the social aspects of life, connecting people together and building belonging, and develops skills and capabilities. These three pathways all rely on using the green space but the fourth pathway, whereby

neighbourhood greenery mitigates against harm, by reducing air pollution, 'heat islands', floods and noise, does not. The role of 'restoration,' whereby viewing green space leads to positive emotions overriding negative thoughts (stress reduction theory) and the ability of nature to effortlessly hold our attention therefore suppressing negative distractions (attention restoration theory) in improving mental health is emphasised by Markevych et al., (2017).

The quality of the green space, its condition in terms of amenities, maintenance and aesthetics and how safe it feels, all affect people's perception of the space, their use of it and therefore the resulting benefits (ten Brink et al., 2016; Weimann et al., 2017; Van Hecke et al., 2018). Biodiversity quality has also been found to affect health benefits (Wood et al., 2018; Cameron et al., 2020).

Green space equity

Green space is not evenly distributed, with PHE concluding that the *"most economically deprived areas have less available good quality public green space"* and therefore, those who most need access are less likely to have it (2020, p30). This is a complex area and methodologies are still developing, with the green space measure used (proximity, size or quality) and what is included affecting results (Rigolon et al., 2016; Mears et al., 2019; Schule et al., 2019; Mears and Brindley, 2019).

Two reviews conclude that deprived areas have lower amounts of green space i.e. the proportion of an area that is green (Rigolon et al., 2016; Schule et al., 2019) fitting with CABE's (2010) UK study that found the 20% most affluent areas had *"five times the amount of parks or general green space (excluding gardens) per person than the most deprived 10% of wards"* (p28). Park quality (amenities, maintenance, safety) also tends to be worse in deprived areas (Rigolon, 2016).

When proximity is measured (the proportion of people who live within a particular distance of green space), results are more mixed, with some deprived areas having better access. Friends of the Earth (2020) developed their own measure of green space 'deprivation' incorporating ONS data on green space and walking distance to the nearest large green space. They found a significant correlation between this and both income and ethnicity. Ethnic minority people were twice as likely as white people to live in neighbourhoods with the lowest access to green space, and people with lower incomes were also more likely to lack access.

Usage data from the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment reveals a similar pattern. Only 57% of those living in the most deprived quintile regularly visit green space vs. 70-76% for all top three quintiles, and whilst 69% of white people are frequent visitors, only 42% of ethnic minority people are (Natural England, 2019). These population groups also visit for less time (Mears et al., 2021).

The importance of good quality green space in deprived neighbourhoods is therefore clear. People living in disadvantage suffer unfairly from health inequalities, and a free to use, health-promoting resource is less available to them than others.

Policy context

PHE (2020) argued that local authorities need to recognise the value of green spaces as *“critical assets”* that need protecting and enhancing in the struggle to tackle health inequalities. Planning teams need to ensure access to such spaces using accessibility standards, and public health teams must work closely with all areas of local government to ensure green space provision is optimised. PHE recommended a ‘two-pronged’ approach, involving improvement in green space infrastructure plus programmes and facilitation to encourage non-users to engage with and access such spaces. This needs to be done in a way that does not inadvertently increase inequality via green ‘gentrification,’ whereby poorer people are priced out of areas benefitting from these improvements.

This advice is in keeping with international efforts. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11.7 is *“By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities”* (United Nations, 2023). The UK Government’s 25-year environment plan (Defra, 2018) pledges to encourage the use of green space and to ‘green’ urban environments by improving green infrastructure.

Park management

Serious concerns regarding the funding and management of parks and green spaces exist. In 2016 the HLF concluded that *“considerable pressure on public finances is making it harder to properly manage, maintain and safeguard this great cultural and environmental resource”* (p2). Five years later, the Association for Public Sector Excellence (APSE), said it was *“disheartening”* that the same warnings had to be repeated, with funding levels being *“too low”* (2021, p4). Similar concerns have been

expressed by other sector organisations (Fields in Trust, 2017; The Parks Alliance, 2020). In 2017 the government funded Parks Action Group was established “*to help England’s public parks and green spaces meet the needs of communities now and in the future*” (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2017). At the follow-up committee meeting in 2022, members expressed disappointment, saying progress had been too slow and piecemeal (House of Commons, 2022).

Local authorities manage 85% of urban parks (APSE, 2021). Substantial cuts to their funding have fallen disproportionately on parks and green spaces, as they are non-statutory services. A spending review found that, between 2010 and 2020, council funding on parks and open spaces reduced by over £250m (LGA, 2021), whilst Guardian newspaper analysis calculated a real-terms reduction of £327 million (or 25%) between 2012 and 2022 (Martinsson et al., 2022). Deprived areas were more affected, with 87% of the most deprived authorities cutting spending, vs. 58% of the most affluent, and poorer regions experienced the biggest cuts. At the same time, park usage increased, adding to maintenance pressures. Parks teams, within local authorities, are also facing other challenges. Their roles and responsibilities have broadened out from largely operational to also including environmental agendas (biodiversity, climate change), raising income and engaging with the community (APSE, 2019). Morale has been negatively affected by long-term under-resourcing and de-skilling. The workforce is also ageing.

Various initiatives to explore alternative funding or management options have been trialled, including the Future Parks Accelerator (Future Parks, 2023) and the Rethinking Parks programme (Nesta, 2016). Whilst good ideas exist, the challenge so far has been scaling them up (House of Commons, 2022).

Friends Groups

Friends Groups consist of members of the public volunteering to look after their local green space or park (see later definition). This study focuses on these groups as they are a growing phenomena that is perceived to be a key part of the solution to many of these issues. APSE call them “*invaluable*,” saying they are “*the greatest hope in helping to ease some of this strain*” due to their ability to help operationally and access additional funds (2021, p8). In 2016 approximately 5900 UK Friends Groups existed, providing £70 million worth of labour, and raising £50 million of funds (HLF, 2016).

Concerns however exist about relying on community action for park maintenance (House of Commons, 2017). One concern is that they could disguise the impact of funding cuts,

another is that, as they are based on volunteer time and commitment, they may lack sustainability or particular skills. Local authorities may also lack the resources to support such groups. In addition, relying on community groups could exacerbate existing inequalities in green space as, whilst local authorities are obligated to consider an area's provision in full, groups could compete against each other for funding and support (House of Commons, 2017).

Despite their importance to green space provision, and the active debates that exist surrounding their role and impact, Friends Groups have received limited academic attention (see Chapter 2). Little is known, for example, about how they operate, the types of individuals involved and the issues that they face. Most notably there is little information as to how neighbourhood deprivation impacts on their role and success. It is these gaps that this study aims to fill.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this study is to identify how Friends Groups can work with local authorities to ensure their urban green spaces are a well maintained and utilised amenity for better public health.

Objectives

1. To develop an understanding of how Friends Groups are currently involved in maintaining and increasing the use of their local urban green spaces. To include the type and amount of activity they do, and their organisational structure.
2. To explore how communities become mobilised to form groups and how these groups are able to sustain their activity, particularly in deprived areas. To include identifying the factors that help mobilisation / sustainability and barriers that exist.
3. To identify lay perspectives on how increased community engagement in local urban green space impacts on the health and wellbeing of group members and users of the space.
4. To investigate how Friends Groups affect the distribution, accessibility and usage of environmental amenities and thus potentially health inequalities.

5. To explore key stakeholders, particularly local authorities and partners, perceptions of Friends Groups engagement in urban green spaces including attitudes to increased involvement and capacity / skills to support.

This study focuses on deprived areas (top quintile using the Index of Multiple Deprivation – see Chapter 5, ‘sampling of groups’) due to the importance of health inequalities as an issue, and the lack of knowledge as to how Friends Groups either contribute to or mitigate against this. It was conducted in England; other UK nations were excluded due to differences in government and green space policies.

Publicly accessible green spaces in urban areas, such as parks, natural areas or woodlands, that can be used for recreation were included, as these are spaces where local people can get involved and experience any benefits. Private gardens and allotments were not included for this reason. See definitions below. Friends Groups that worked together to improve or maintain their local urban green space were included in the study, though they did not have to be formally constituted (see Chapter 5, ‘sampling of groups’).

Definitions

Green space is defined in a multitude of ways, depending on specialism, accessibility, and the type and size of space. ‘Blue’ space i.e. rivers, beaches and lakes can also be included (Taylor and Hochuli, 2017). PHE’s definition is broad.

“Any area of vegetated land, urban or rural. This includes both public and private spaces such as parks, gardens, playing fields, children’s play areas, woods and other natural areas, grassed areas, cemeteries and allotments, green corridors, disused railway lines, rivers and canals, derelict, vacant and contaminated land which has the potential to be transformed.” (PHE, 2020, p6)

As this study (see above), only includes urban green spaces that the public (and Friends Groups) can interact with, Natural England’s definition of ‘accessible greenspace’ is utilised.

“places that are available for the general public to use free of charge and without time restrictions [...]. The places are available to all [...] and will also be known to the target users, including potential users who live within the site catchment area.” (Natural England, 2010)

Many types of green space exist (Forest Research, 2023). Those within the scope of this study include parks, natural or semi-natural spaces, cemeteries and churchyards and green corridors, as all have the potential for public interaction. Private gardens, allotments, community gardens, city farms were excluded, unless they were freely accessible to the public. Outdoor sports facilities were also excluded, unless they existed within the context of a park, because their use is more singular and specific than the community spaces that this study focuses on.

'Green infrastructure' is a term used to denote a network of greenery (WHO, 2016, p3) and could include, for example, street trees or 'living walls'. Accessible green spaces form part, but not all, of this.

There is no agreed definition of Friends Groups, but one organisation describes them as follows;

"Friends of Parks groups, or "Friends", are local volunteers that have historically supported parks and acted as voluntary community custodians over their use; being fundraisers, influencers, conservationists, managers, and event organisers. They have also acted as the 'eyes and ears' of our parks when they come under threat or they're being mis-managed. Friends of groups are then often the glue that keeps many a park at their best, and the actions taken by these volunteers should be valued highly"

(Fields in Trust, 2019).

This description emphasises the voluntary and local nature of the phenomena as well as the diverse nature of their activities and therefore, whilst long, feels apt for this study.

Terms

Key terms used throughout this thesis, for consistency, are as follows:

- 'Friends Groups', not 'Friends of Parks Groups' as is used in some literature.
- 'Friend', 'volunteer' or 'member' to denote an individual involved in the group, and 'leader' for those in charge (this may or may not be their formal position).
- 'Local authorities' is used to refer to councils / local government organisations who have responsibility for parks and green spaces in an area. Participants often use the word 'Council' and this is kept in verbatim quotes.

- 'Parks teams' is used to refer to people employed by local authorities to improve or maintain parks and green spaces.

This chapter has, so far, provided the context of and rationale for this study. Health inequalities are a major UK issue and urban green spaces can help tackle this by improving the health and wellbeing of deprived communities. Yet provision of quality green spaces is uneven and threatened by inadequate funding. Friends Groups are a substantial UK phenomena that have a part to play in improving these resources, yet they are currently under researched. This study therefore attempts to fill this gap. A brief overview of the structure of this thesis is provided next, concluding this chapter.

Thesis structure

The table below outlines the core content of each thesis chapter.

Table 1.1: Thesis chapters

Chapter Number	Title	Content
	Prologue	This short chapter outlines my personal background and rationale for the choice of topic.
1	Introduction	<p>This chapter provides the context for and the academic rationale for the topic, including the issue of health inequalities, the role of green space in health, its unequal distribution and issues regarding park management.</p> <p>The aims and objectives of the study, along with key definitions and terms utilised throughout the thesis, concludes the chapter.</p>
2	Friends Groups literature review	<p>Evidence from a narrative literature review, relating to Friends Group specifically is presented.</p> <p>Information about Friends Groups origins, prevalence / distribution and characteristics is provided. One section summarises and describes their roles and responsibilities. Literature relating to their relationship with local authorities is explored in detail before key issues for Friends Groups are identified.</p>
3	Green space volunteering literature review	<p>This chapter broadens out to incorporate other, overlapping, fields of enquiry relating to volunteering in green spaces.</p> <p>Environmental volunteering and guerrilla gardening are discussed first, before examining the ideas of civic ecology and public participation in green spaces.</p>

		This chapter concludes by drawing together and comparing all the evidence identified in Chapters 2 & 3. A summary of evidence, along with key gaps – that helped focus this study - is provided.
4	Conceptual understandings	<p>This short chapter identifies the concepts that influenced this study. It explains how the understandings gained from these influenced the study design and interpretations.</p> <p>How control and health are linked is examined, along with concepts of, control, power and empowerment, participation, asset-based approaches and volunteering theories.</p>
5	Methodology	<p>This detailed chapter describes how the study was conducted, in order to address the research aims and objectives fully, rigorously and ethically. Reasons for the choices made and how these worked in reality, are discussed throughout.</p> <p>Aspects covered include: the approach undertaken, the overall project design, sampling and recruitment, data collection and ethical considerations. How the data was analysed is covered in detail. The chapter ends by considering the role of the researcher in the study via active-reflexivity.</p>
6	Preliminary results: case-studies, activities and success	<p>This is the first results chapters, consisting of three parts. First an overview of the seven case-studies and how they fit the sampling criteria is given. Secondly, a description of the groups' main activities is provided. Finally, the issue of success is addressed. Different aspects of success are identified, with each group assessed against these. This enables success factors to be identified and discussed, leading to Chapters 7 & 8.</p>
7	Place, People and Process results	<p>Three higher level concepts, affecting the success of Friends Groups are presented here. These include factors relating to the place, the people and the process of running the groups.</p> <p>All results are presented from the perspective of the seven Friends Group case studies. For each domain a description of key features is given, using narrative accounts and quotes, from the case studies.</p> <p>To identify explanatory success factors, patterns between these key features and levels of success are examined.</p>
8	The relationship with local authorities	<p>This chapter focuses on the relationship between Friends Groups and local authorities, from their two differing perspectives.</p> <p>Themes presented include their opinions on the other type of organisation, issues affecting their relationship and potential ways of improving it.</p>

		The power dynamic between Friends Groups and local authorities is explored, constituting the fourth and final domain. Higher level themes discussed include issues of control, diversity and deprivation.
9	Discussion	<p>This chapter answers the study's aims and objectives, drawing on existing evidence (Chapters 2-3) and the findings attained from this study (Chapters 6-8). Findings that concur are identified, but the main focus is on new or additional insights gained by undertaking this research.</p> <p>A framework that illustrates figuratively the key success factors for Friends Groups is presented.</p>
10	Conclusion and recommendations	This short section brings the thesis to a close, identifying the main messages emerging from this research and its contribution to knowledge. A series of recommendations are presented.
	Appendices	These include additional supporting information such as data collection tools and a more comprehensive list of recommendations.

Chapter 2: Friends Group Literature Review

The next two chapters examine and present evidence on voluntary activities in parks and green spaces. This chapter presents the results of a narrative review, focusing specifically on Friends Groups, with the evidence described and discussed in-depth. Chapter 3, following, broadens out to give an account of other related fields of enquiry such as environmental volunteering and public participation. The rationale for this structure is that, whilst there are particular and unique characteristics of Friends Groups, learnings can also be gained from understanding other related concepts. All fit however within the area of voluntary activities in green spaces or, more colloquially 'people doing good things in green places.'

Review methodology

Approach

A narrative review of Friends Groups was undertaken. This type of review provides a "*scholarly summary*" featuring "*interpretation and critique*" (Greenhalgh et al., 2018, p2) and is recommended when the aim is to create an interpretive understanding of a particular topic, based on thoughtful, reflective engagement with a wide range of evidence. It is similar to a 'critical review' (Grant and Booth, 2009). Systematic reviews are important tools when aiming to draw together and assess all available evidence on a topic, but they are not always suited to a particular research endeavour, as they can be overly restrictive, focused on specifics, rather than seeking to gain insight (Grant and Booth, 2009; Greenhalgh et al., 2018). For this reason, it was decided to undertake a narrative review, rather than a systematic one, for this study.

Search strategy

The search strategy aimed to identify evidence relating specifically to Friends Groups operating in parks and green spaces. Advice was sought from university library staff and by reading the search methodologies of reviews in a similar area (e.g., Fors et al., 2015). Trial searches were undertaken to identify which terms and databases produced the most relevant results.

In terms of search terms, two key aspects were relevant – group type and setting. The first was kept specific as the desire was to focus on publications specific to Friends Groups. Different variations on phrasing were utilised including “Friends of Groups”, “Friends Groups” and “Friends of”. To ensure comprehensiveness a wildcard with the root words was also used i.e. “Friend* Group*”. Expanding the terms to include “communit* group” or “volunt* group” revealed many more, less relevant results, so these terms were not utilised.

The setting, parks and green spaces, was the second key aspect of the search. Many alternative terms exist for this, for example, green infrastructure or urban forest (e.g. Fors et al., 2015) with the most successful combination found to be “Park*” or “Green Space”. The final combination of terms that yielded the most relevant results were [“friend* group” AND “park” OR “parks” OR “green space*”]. Searches using these terms were conducted with these phrases in the title, key words or abstract – or in the Discover database ‘Select a Field’ as this automatically selects these areas.

Limitations applied included being in the English language (for accessibility) and dating from between the year 2000 (when the Friends Group movement largely began) to the present day. As these groups are very contextual, specific to particular societies, only studies set in countries with a similar culture and socio-economic structure e.g., UK, mainland Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand were included. Results from countries such as China were excluded, as the cultural differences were too great for findings to be relevant.

Despite using specific terms many irrelevant results did arise, potentially because of the commonality of the words. Evidence relating to Friends Groups in other services e.g., libraries often arose, whilst the word “Park” yielded irrelevant results from different disciplines e.g., car parks. These were excluded manually as doing that during the initial search also removed relevant results.

The search was not limited to peer-reviewed articles as knowledge of the field indicated that ‘grey’ literature e.g., reports, also contained important relevant evidence. As being in a peer-reviewed journal is an indicator of the quality of evidence, these articles were given increased weight and credibility in the review.

A variety of databases were utilised as the topic does not sit neatly within one, spanning across disciplines such as landscape, environment, planning and public sector management. The optimum results tended to be found either within the Leeds Beckett University ‘Discover’ tool or via ‘Google Scholar’ as both cover a wide range of disciplines.

The latter also includes non-peer reviewed articles but as discussed above, this was useful for this topic. Health databases e.g., Cinahl, Medline, Psychinfo were trialled but yielded few results.

Manual searches also took place. References of key papers were searched for other potentially relevant publications and inserted into Scopus, using the 'cited by' tool, to identify studies that had referenced them. Key authors were identified and their names used to search for other relevant publications plus websites of key stakeholders (e.g. National Federation for Parks and Green Spaces) were searched. In addition, key stakeholders e.g. the HLF sent copies of relevant reports.

Eventually, having undertaken a number of different searches, the same evidence kept reoccurring and very few new results were produced. At this point, searching for new literature was ended, as saturation had been achieved.

Included studies

Table 2.1 presents this literature review results. Sixteen pieces of evidence, pertaining to Friends Groups, published between 2002 and 2022, are included.

Table 2.1: Friends Group literature review results

Title (brief)	Authors / date	Published / location	Methodology / participants	Key information
Peer reviewed				
Place-keeping in action: Evaluating the capacity of green space partnerships in England	Mathers et al. 2015	Landscape and Urban Planning UK (3 areas)	Case studies of Friends Groups (FGs) and local authorities (LAs) in three areas (Sheffield, London, Stockton, UK) LA interviews * 6 FG interviews * 12	Explores capacity of cross-sector partnerships to manage green spaces 'place-keeping'. Identifies key success factors and barriers.
Place-keeping for health? Charting the challenges for urban park management in practice	Nam and Dempsey 2019	Sustainability UK (Sheffield)	Interviews with professionals and FGs involved in management of six Sheffield parks.	Focus on 'place-keeping'. How to achieve effective place-keeping for health and wellbeing
Partnerships in action: strategies for the development of voluntary community groups in urban parks	Jones 2002a	Leisure Studies UK (two areas)	Longitudinal case studies Two UK local authorities and FGs in them (12 and 14) Mixed method: Interviews with council officers and FGs Analysis of docs Observations	Model for how to manage FGs, in various stages. Initial motivations, how to initiate, how to support as groups develop.
Enticement: the role of community involvement in the management of public parks	Jones 2002b	Managing Leisure UK (two areas)	Uses same data as other paper (above)	Enticement – how FGs work to encourage other people into the park (security / facilities) Success factors for effective working relationships Key issues
Facilitating and evaluating public participation in Urban Parks Management	Speller and Ravenscroft 2005	Local Environment UK (Brighton)	Case study (longitudinal) of an urban park FG in Brighton	Reports on initiation and support for a FG. Designs two matrices to monitor process and outcomes. Identifies success factors.

Blame it on austerity? Examining the impetus behind London's changing green space governance	Whitten, 2019	People, place and policy online UK (London)	Lit review of austerity / cuts to discretionary services. Part of a bigger project. 50 interviews – mainly with LA / govt officers, but also community organisations. Plus documentary analysis.	Impact of austerity on green space management, role of FGs, benefits of FGs, challenges.
An exploratory investigation of the roles FGs play in National Park Management	Baker et al. 2010	Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education and Leadership USA	Two phases: Focus groups with FGs and Park Management (x18) Questionnaire (n=24) with FGs	Explored attributes and roles of FGs. Plus barriers / success factors.
Urban parks, environmental justice, and voluntarism: The distribution of Friends of the Parks groups in Milwaukee County	Holifield and Williams 2014	Environmental Justice <i>NB preprint only</i> USA	Plots FGs with park distribution / relates to local population ethnicity	Distribution of FGs by park size / ethnicity of area.
Feel blue? Touch green! Participation in forest/woodland management as a treatment for depression	Townsend 2006	Urban Forestry & Urban Greening	Benefits of being part of a FG – two studies included.	

'Grey' Literature i.e. not peer reviewed				
Success Factors for Friends of the Park Groups	Walker 2016	MSc thesis UK (Manchester)	Case study of a successful FG – included interviews with 8 members and 4 professionals	Identifies key success factors for FGs plus their role, influence and motivation
The Future of Edward Kemp-designed parks and cemeteries and the role of FGs	Lee 2018	Garden History UK (mainly North West)	Based on a symposium in 2017. 15 FGs. Data from presentations and submitted evidence.	Aims of FGs, role / profile of volunteers, their contribution and successes.
Ethnic minority inclusion and participation in UGS: Good Practices of UK Friends Groups	Haqqani 2022	MSc thesis, with National Federation Parks & Green Spaces Website (UK)	Mixed method including Participatory Action Research. Thesis reports on interview findings. Other data (not reported) included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary analysis of NFPGS Better Friends Survey. • Questionnaire (n=26) • Social media analysis 	Themes and recommendations for successful inclusion of ethnic minorities into FGs.
Better Friends: The State of the movement of green space FGs throughout the UK	National Federation Parks and Green Spaces 2021	National Federation Website UK	Data extracted from 'Better Friends' Tool. Questionnaire results from 211 green space community groups.	Survey results – FGs roles, activities, volunteering hours, skills, membership, achievements, representation.
Parks and People, Stronger Together	Parks Action Group 2019	National Federation Website UK	Report on a series of 9 green space conferences in England	Reports key learning points from workshops / recommendations for future
Community Networking Project	Greenspace community 2012	Supplied by HLF	Survey of community groups (most of which are FGs)	Numbers re formality of FGs, activities, funds, connections to other groups, relationship with LA.

State of UK Public Parks	HLF 2016	HLF website	Surveys of Park Managers (n=196 individuals, 46% of LAs), Friends Groups (n=407) plus public opinion (n=2130)	
State of UK Public Parks 2021	APSE – Association of Public Sector Excellence 2021	APSE website	78 local authority responses Survey	

Eight results are from peer-reviewed academic journals, reporting on empirical studies with Friends Groups. One paper reports on two studies (Townsend, 2006), whilst two papers (Jones, 2002a; Jones, 2002b) report on the same study, therefore eight studies in total are reported on. Four are from the UK, two from the USA (Baker et al., 2010; Holifield and Williams, 2014) and two from Australia (Townsend, 2006). These studies tended to be from journals within the Landscape, Environmental or Management disciplines with none from health, public health or health promotion journals.

Eight results are 'grey' literature, all from the UK. This includes two MSc theses, five reports from parks and green space organisations (National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces (NFPGS), Parks Action Group, APSE, HLF and Greenspace Community network) plus one garden history article.

The NFPGS is an advocacy organisation for Friends Groups, its mission being "*to amplify the voices of Friends Groups across the UK*" (natfedparks.org.uk, undated). It is connected to much of the included grey literature, being the author of one report (NFPGS, 2021), a partner / advisor on one MSc thesis (Haqqani, 2022), a key stakeholder in the Parks Action Group and contributing to the 2016 HLF report. The fact one organisation has contributed to a large proportion of the grey literature needs to be acknowledged, as it could mean a particular viewpoint is dominating part of the evidence base.

The study type varied. Seven publications report on qualitative studies (four of which were case studies), two used a mixed methodology, and five were quantitative. Two reported on workshops with Friends Groups.

A multiple case-study design, featuring the perspectives of both Friends Groups and local authorities, was utilised by two studies (three publications). Mathers et al. (2015) study, in three local authority areas, featured eighteen interviews with park management and Friends Groups from nine parks. Jones (2002 a and b) conducted longitudinal case studies in two UK local authorities, including interviews with local authority officers and Friends Groups, documentary analysis and meeting observations. Single case studies were conducted by Walker (2016) and Speller and Ravenscroft (2015). The former, a MSc thesis, studied a successful group in Manchester, whilst the latter carried out a longitudinal case study of a Brighton group, following their journey from recruitment and initiation to becoming established. The researchers were involved in the process of setting up the group, on behalf of the local authority, therefore being active participants in the process.

Three other qualitative studies are included. Haqqani's (2022) MSc thesis conducted virtual interviews with Friends Groups who had successfully incorporated people from ethnic minority backgrounds into the organisation. Nam and Dempsey (2019) carried out interviews with professionals and Friends Groups involved in managing six Sheffield parks whilst Whitten's (2019) paper is based on interviews with local authority or government officers and community groups (most but not all Friends Groups) in London.

Two publications centre on workshops with Friends Groups. Lee (2018) reports on a symposium with fifteen Friends Groups from Edward Kemp (a Victorian landscape architect) designed parks and cemeteries. Findings are based on presentations, workshop discussions and follow-up emails. Similarly, the Parks Action Group report (2019) presents themes from nine workshops across the UK (seven organised by the NFPGS). Three-quarters of the approximately 200 participants, were from Friends or community groups.

Five quantitative studies are included. Holifield and Williams (2014) USA study analysed the distribution of Friends Group in relation to population ethnicity and deprivation in one county, using an environmental justice lens. The other four were descriptive surveys, containing information on, for example, the role of Friends Groups, their activities, membership and connections. The most recent (NFPGS, 2021) received 211 responses from Friends Groups – data was extracted from groups taking part in a 'Strength Checker' exercise. In 2016, the HLF published a report entitled 'State of UK Public Parks.' This drew on data from a range of sources including a park manager survey (n=196, from 193 local authorities) and a Friends Group survey (n=407). APSE later continued some aspects of this work (2021). The Greenspace Community (2012) survey received 510 responses, 54% of which were Friends Groups, the others being community groups involved in green space. Some, but not all, the results, are split by group type so the Friends Group data can be examined separately. All these surveys are descriptive only and not peer-reviewed and thus needed to be viewed with some caution. One bias is that the samples were not selected in a representative way – in all cases groups chose to participate, with the survey distributed via existing networks. It is likely therefore that an atypical sample responded – most probably the most active or engaged groups. Despite these concerns the findings are included within the literature review as they provide the best available numerical data on Friends Groups.

The final two studies are mixed method. Townsend (2006) explored benefits associated with being part of an environmental volunteering group, using both qualitative and

quantitative data. The paper included four different studies, two of which were Friends Groups. The quantitative data is not presented by group type, so untangling the findings relevant to Friends Groups is not possible, however the qualitative findings were, so these are included in this review. Baker et al. (2010) conducted a study in the USA consisting of two phases, the first qualitative (focus groups with Friends Groups and Park Management), the second quantitative (a questionnaire with 24 responses).

Overall therefore the evidence base regarding Friends Groups is limited and 'patchy'. There are a small number of high-quality studies, most notably the multiple case studies conducted by Mathers et al. (2015), Jones (2002a) and Jones (2002b), which give an in-depth insight into Friends Groups and park management and their relationship, presenting a dual perspective. The study by Jones however was conducted more than 20 years ago, raising concerns regarding current relevance. The individual case studies add depth but are, by their nature, specific to one group and therefore potentially lacking generalisability. The 'grey' literature does add to the evidence, but caution regarding its use needs to be applied, given the lack of transparency over how some of the findings were reached, potential sampling biases in the surveys and the fact one advocacy organisation was involved in many publications.

Review findings

In this section Friends Groups are viewed largely as a UK phenomena and therefore it is mainly UK based literature that is included. Non-UK literature is included if the findings are potentially transferable to the phenomena studied or have resonance with it.

Origins / rationale

The UK Friends Group movement began, in earnest, in the 2000s (Jones, 2002a; Lee, 2018; Whitten, 2019), with only limited examples before (Lee, 2018). Of the fifteen groups studied by Lee (2018) four formed before 2000, nine between 2001 and 2006 and one after. The Greenspace Community (2012) survey found that 62% of the 275 participating Friends Groups formed between 2003 and 2010.

Numbers continued to grow in the 2010s. The average number of groups per local authority, as estimated by park managers, increasing from 11 in 2013, to 14 in 2016 (HLF, 2016) and in 2021, 60% of park managers said that numbers were increasing (a third said

numbers were static, and less than 10% that they were decreasing) (APSE, 2021, p28). Between 2000 and 2021 therefore the Friends Group phenomena flourished.

One important reason for the start of this movement, was that, by the 1990s, the quality of many parks had become very poor (Lee, 2018; Whitten, 2019). Many were plagued by antisocial behaviour, vandalism and some previously much-loved parks, were described as having a “*pervasive air of despair*” and being “*no-go zones*” (Lee, 2018, p184). This led to members of the public wanting to act to protect and restore their local parks.

Historical reasons for the poor quality of urban green space at this time relate to central government policy from the 1970s until the late 1990s. Government spending to local authorities decreased by 15% in the 1980s and parks were seen as an easy target for budgetary reductions (Whitten, 2019), potentially due to a limited appreciation of their benefits (Lee, 2018). Compulsory competitive tendering, introduced in 1988, further reduced quality as park maintenance was contracted out, on a cost basis, to external organisations, negatively impacting specialist skills. Local government also re-organised, with parks teams often being subsumed into larger organisational units, such as leisure services, thus reducing their influence. Degraded facilities, low staff morale and a loss of community contact were all features of parks during this time (Jones, 2002a).

By the late 1990s public and political concern regarding the poor state of parks and green spaces had grown, and attention on how to reverse this increased. The Urban Parks Programme and the Green Flag award (an indicator of park quality) were launched in 1996 and, a year later, the new Labour government came into power (Whitten, 2019). In recognition of these concerns, the new government set up an urban greenspace taskforce that recommended increasing funding amounts and sources. In 2006 the HLF’s Parks programme began, leading to 800 parks in 64% of local authorities receiving £850m (HLF, 2016). A key feature of this programme was increased engagement with the community.

The political and funding situation altered again when the next government, the coalition, came into power in 2010. Their austerity policy led to large budget cuts for local authorities (decreasing by 27% between 2011 and 2015) especially in cities (Whitten, 2019). Discretionary services, such as parks and green spaces, were especially badly affected. Between 2013 and 2015, for example, 92% of green space management teams were subject to budgetary cuts and three-quarters suffered a reduction in staff numbers (HLF, 2016). At the same time, the government was reducing regulation and giving local government increased flexibility in how they ran services, via the Localism Act of 2011. The era of the ‘Big Society’, which aimed to empower communities and redistribute power

to “*foster a culture of volunteerism*” also began. This new government philosophy, plus the financial circumstances, led to a drive to manage urban green space via partnerships, with governance expanding from just local authorities to include other organisations such as Friends Groups, charities and private sector companies (Mathers et al., 2015; Whitten, 2019).

This ‘shift’ in how public services operate, and their relationship with communities, is described by New Local (Pollard et al., 2021). In the state paradigm, that existed from the 1940s, professionals dominated and the public were passive service users. From the 1980s the ‘market’ paradigm emerged, with its focus on efficiency and costs, reducing interactions to transactions and treating the public as ‘customers’. The new ‘community power’ paradigm, recognises the role of communities and emphasises the benefits of actively collaborating.

This brief overview of the historical context shows how the Friends Group movement emerged in the 2000s as the public reacted to the poor quality of parks and green spaces that followed decades of underfunding and inattention. Subsequent policies and funding re-focused attention on parks and green spaces, but the emphasis had shifted from it being solely the remit of local authorities, funded by central government, to being a shared responsibility in which Friends Groups play a key role. These findings provide useful contextual background for this study. Many participating Friends Groups were formed during this time and many of the park staff interviewed would have worked throughout this period, experiencing the changes in budgets and underlying philosophies as they happened.

Prevalence and distribution

Accurately identifying numbers of UK Friends Group is challenging. Figures range from 5900 to 7000, though often without clarity on how this was calculated.

The figure of 7000 features in the APSE report (2021) via a quote from the NFPGS Chair. The NFPGS use this figure in reports (NFPGS, 2021) and on their website but there is no published information on how it was attained. The Parks Action Group (2019) quote a similar but different figure of 6500, but again, no explanation for how this was attained.

One report (HLF, 2016) provides some explanation on the numbers quoted. This gives a figure of 5900 Friends Groups in 2016, up by 1100 from 2014. A survey asked park managers how many groups were in their area, with an average response of 14. Nearly

half (46%) of local authorities responded, if this is multiplied up to all local authorities a number close to 5900 is reached. A follow-up survey, conducted five years later (APSE, 2021), asked if numbers of groups had changed, with over 60% saying they had increased. No actual numbers however were given.

The figure of 7000 Friends Groups therefore could be possible (based on 5900 in 2016 and numbers increasing afterwards) but the methods by which numbers were reached lack transparency and validity. It assumes park managers can accurately assess the number of groups in their area and that the proportion that responded are representative of all local authorities. Neither of these assumptions are necessarily correct and this uncertainty is not discussed in the reports. Friends Groups 'ebb and flow' (Holifield and Williams, 2014; Lee, 2018) and whether the surveys asked for 'active' groups or 'all' is not clear; the numbers could be quite different. Setting this in context, it is estimated that there are approximately 27,000 UK parks and green spaces (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2017). If between 6000 and 7000 Friends Groups exist, approximately 1 in 4 have one aligned to them.

The relevance of this is that if local authorities (and government in general) are unaware of the size of the phenomenon they may not appreciate its importance, or appropriately value its input, and therefore may not provide sufficient support (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). This is discussed more in Chapter 3 'civic ecology'.

Even less data on where UK Friends Groups are located exists. There are indications that London, South-East England and other large urban places have more than other areas. The 'Better Friends' survey (NFPGS, 2021), for example, received most responses from London (n=22), North-West England (n=11), Birmingham (n=9), Leeds (n=7) and Brighton (n=7). The earlier Greenspace Community survey (2012) reports a similar pattern. Out of 478 responses (54% of which were Friends Groups), most were from London (29%), the South-East (15%), the North-West (11%) and the East Midlands (11%). HLF (2016) report that 85% of local authorities have Friends Groups but provide no location information. Areas where there seem to be fewer groups include the North-East of England and Wales and there were no responses from Northern Ireland to either survey.

Again, there are concerns regarding how representative these samples are – the Better Friends data relies on groups completing a 'Strength Checker' on the NFPGS website, requiring them to be aware of the organisation and willing to undertake the on-line exercise (more likely arguably if they are a member). The Greenspace Community survey reached out to groups using a variety of networks and, as it does not rely on one

organisation only, could be less biased. The authors do state however that they had limited resources for outreach.

No publicly available data on the location of UK Friends Groups at a ward, city or neighbourhood level exists. In contrast, one USA study (Holifield and Williams, 2014) examined the distribution of Friends Groups within one county. The location of groups, and whether they were active or inactive, was plotted and compared to local population ethnicity. They found that 70% of active groups were located in predominantly white areas. This, the authors said, was more reflective of park distribution, than population ethnicity, as groups were more likely to remain active in larger parks, which are more commonly located in white-dominated suburbs, compared to inner city neighbourhoods. Regardless of demographics, only 22% of parks had an active Friends Group. The environmental justice challenge therefore is to keep groups active in smaller inner-city parks. This study demonstrates that examining Friends Groups distribution, at a neighbourhood level, can be done and lead to important insights.

To summarise, available data indicates that there are more than 5900 UK Friends Groups, but these are estimates only, with limited information on whether they are active or not. Distribution data, at regional and neighbourhood level, is lacking, meaning environmental justice issues cannot be fully understood. Whilst this study does not aim to examine prevalence, this issue regarding data features in the recommendations and, more broadly the issues of representation and inequality are explored qualitatively throughout (see Chapter 7, 'the people domain' and Chapter 8 'diversity and deprivation').

Group characteristics

Member / volunteer numbers

The number of people involved in Friends Groups is reported by four sources (HLF, 2016; Lee, 2018; Nam & Dempsey, 2019; NFPGS, 2021).

NFPGS (2021) utilise categorical data, split into 'members' and 'core volunteers'. Most groups report having 'up to 50' members (55% of respondents), followed by between 50 and 250 (26%) and between 250-1000 (15%). Some groups could have far fewer members, as the lowest possible response was 'up to 50'. The most common number of 'core' volunteers was 7-10 (41%), then 4-6 (34%), then 'more than 11' (21%). The most

'typical' group, from this survey, therefore consists of 7-10 core volunteers and 'up to' 50 members.

Lee (2018) provides data on fifteen groups, split by members (total/active) and volunteers (total/active), with considerable variation between groups. Member numbers range from 3-50 'active' and 8-250 'total', and volunteer numbers range from 3-50 'active' and 8-70 'total'. Some groups did not differentiate between members and volunteers (giving the same numbers for both) whilst others had substantial differences, suggesting a more active 'core' group with a wider support base. Nam and Dempsey (2019) also separate member numbers between active and total, albeit only in six groups, the smallest with 2/5 (active / total members), the largest 20/300. The average number of people per groups, reported by the HLF (2016) was 113 in 2016, up from 83 in 2013. They say that 650,000 people are involved in UK Friends Groups; comparing this to other surveys it appears likely this relates to members, as opposed to active volunteers.

This data reveals a wide variation between groups in terms of the numbers of people involved. Some are relatively large organisations with dozens of people involved, whilst others are very small. There is a lack of clarity as to what a 'member' or a 'volunteer' is, and how these vary, leading to a lack of uniformity in terms of how individuals are categorised. What is notable however is that a common model is to have a smaller group of volunteers, with a wider support base.

Members paying fees is mentioned in two studies. Lee (2018) says some UK groups in his study receive a "*small monthly contribution*" (p189) from members. This was more common in affluent areas as, in deprived areas, groups are concerned fees would deter members from joining. Baker et al.'s (2010) study of Friends Groups in USA National Parks found most members paid fees, and many employed staff, potentially indicating a very different type of group to that commonly existing in the UK.

Volunteering hours / contribution

Limited data on volunteering hours, per group, is available from two sources.

HLF (2016) found that the average number of volunteering days per group per year was 247. Using a value of £50 per day, and assuming 5900 groups (as discussed above) the value of all UK Friends Groups contribution in one year was estimated at £70 million. Groups also raised approximately £50 million per year via fundraising efforts. These were

increases on the previous 2013 survey of 183 average volunteering days, valued at £40 million, plus £30 million from fundraising.

NFPGS (2021) report 38% of groups volunteer 'up to 200 hours per year' (27 days approximately), 26% 'up to 1000 hours' (133 days approximately) and 23% volunteer for 'more than 1000 hours,' generally lower than the HLF (2016) figures. Again, as the data is categorical it is likely that there is considerable variation within these numbers. The lowest category is 'up to 200 hours' meaning it is possible that some groups may be volunteering very few.

Structure / site

Nearly all Friends Groups are constituted. Two surveys give a figure of 95% (GreenSpace Community, 2012; HLF, 2016) and one of 85% (NFPGS, 2021). Approximately one in four (27%) are registered charities, whilst 16% are informal associations with no constitution or committee (HLF, 2016).

Most, 64% according to NFPGS (2021), are situated in formal parks. GreenSpace Community (2012) report that 43% are in formal parks, with smaller proportions based in woodlands (34%), recreation grounds (33%), nature reserves (32%) and community gardens (22%). Figures add up to more than 100% as sites often feature a combination of characteristics. This variation in type of space features in this study's findings (Chapter 7, 'the place domain').

These findings, all from 'grey' literature, provide some insight into the number of people involved in Friends Groups and their contribution. There is considerable uncertainty though, partly because of the lack of clear definitions, potentially reflecting the lack of rigorous attention given to these groups. What does emerge however is that there is considerable variation between groups in terms of how many people are involved and the amount of hours contributed. If the figures are taken as indicative however, tens of thousands of volunteers are involved and many more 'members', contributing tens of millions of pounds worth of volunteering time and fundraising efforts. To truly ascertain the scale of the Friends Group movement and the value of its contribution to public spaces, more attention needs to be given to collecting accurate, rigorous data on group numbers, members and their input. Whilst outside the scope of this particular study, it is included within the recommendations (Chapter 10).

Friend characteristics

This section presents available data on individual Friends' characteristics in terms of age, gender, social-class and ethnicity.

The lack of representativeness of Friends Groups is commented on in several publications, who argue more diverse types of people need to become involved (Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Parks Action Group, 2019). Friends Group members tend to be older and struggle to recruit younger people (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Mathers et al, 2015; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Parks Action Group, 2019; Whitten, 2019). There is also a lack of representation in terms of ethnicity (Mathers et al., 2015; Parks Action Group, 2019; Haqqani, 2022) with Haqqani's MSc thesis focusing on strategies to increasing the number of ethnic minority people involved. Gender is less often commented upon, though Matther's et al. (2015) mention a lack of diversity here too. Social class is not mentioned in any of the studies. Speller and Ravenscroft (2005) concur that the Friends Group they facilitated were not representative, however they did listen to other perspectives and attempt to provide facilities and activities for other types of people, such as teenagers.

Quantitative data on individual characteristics is however very limited, with two of the main surveys providing no information on this (GreenSpace Community, 2012; HLF, 2016).

NFPGS (2021) report some information but no actual numbers. Survey respondents were asked how representative they thought their membership / active members were of the site's users, by age, gender, social class, ethnicity, disability and interest. Response options were very / fairly / not very. Respondents thought their membership was most representative in terms of gender (92% very or fairly), then class (85% very or fairly) and then age (79% very or fairly). Lower responses were received for ethnicity (59% saying members were very or fairly representative) or disability (51%). Figures for active members were similar, albeit slightly lower. The weakness of this data is that it is subjective, based on respondents' opinions of site users and what is representative. It does reveal however that groups perceive themselves as least representative in terms of ethnicity and disability.

The only other quantitative data is from the Parks Action Group (2019) conference report. Workshops delegates (numbering over 200) were asked to self-report demographic information. Numbers are approximate as they are taken from a bar graph, but show that over 80% were white British, about two-thirds were female, half over 60 years old (56%

were retired) and 56% 'middle class'. Workshop attendees are unlikely to reflect membership as a whole but do perhaps indicate a certain type of person being involved.

Personal characteristics of individuals involved in Friends Groups feature briefly in three qualitative studies. Jones (2002b) says members need to be forceful, determined, solution focused, want to contribute, to believe they are capable and have time available. Required skills include personal / social abilities, networking and functional / business skills. Whitten (2019) discusses how members need resources, experience and social capital, and this is likely to lead to a bias in terms of who has influence over parks and green spaces. In the Walker (2016) case study the group possessed "*exceptional levels of political understanding and community organising skills*" (p62) due, in part, to the Chair's previous professional career, trade union activity and connections. These findings relating to personal characteristics also emerged in this study and are discussed in detail in Chapter 7, 'the people domain'.

There are clear indications therefore that Friends Groups are not representative of populations as a whole, however, the data is limited and relies on self-report or qualitative studies. If Friends Groups are assumed to have an influence on parks and green spaces, attaining more accurate information on who is participating is important, see Chapter 9, 'discussion'.

Motivations

Relatively limited information on individual's motivations for becoming involved in Friends Groups exists. Three qualitative studies (Jones 2002b; Mathers et al., 2015; Walker, 2016) discuss it briefly, though it is often not the main research focus.

Passion and instrumentalism, Jones (2002b) argues, are the two main motives for becoming involved. Passion could be for the park itself or the neighbourhood as a whole, often stemming from childhood. Instrumentalist motivations (practical or pragmatic reasons) could relate to stopping the neighbourhood (and property prices) deteriorating or having somewhere for children to play. Mathers et al. (2015) identifies social reasons as the main motive for involvement, especially for older women. Walker (2016) splits motivations into those that encourage people to join, and those that keep them returning – the former is often a desire to improve the park, the latter relates to the satisfaction of seeing results, meeting others and the enjoyment of working together.

The studies therefore describe a variety of different motivations. There is a lack of detailed information however on why – and how - people become involved and how that might vary by person, by area and their stage of involvement. A deeper, more comprehensive knowledge of motivations could help improve the recruitment of Friends, their satisfaction levels and hence their retention. This study contributes to this area of evidence, exploring in detail how and why people become and stay involved (see Chapter 7, people and process domains).

Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of Friends Groups are reported regularly. In some studies the data is qualitative, in others, quantitative surveys have been used to ascertain how common the various activities are. This section first presents each type of activity before providing an overall picture, or model.

Activity type

'Maintaining the space' is a key role of Friends Groups (Holifield and Williams, 2014; Lee, 2018; NFPGS, 2021). The Better Friends survey (NFPGS, 2021) states 91% of groups do 'practical volunteering', whilst the equivalent figure from GreenSpace Community is 68% (2012). Some studies suggest Friends Groups are not always willing or able to undertake practical volunteering; Mathers et al. (2015) says groups can be resistant because of a lack of ability or desire, whilst Lee (2018) says that, as volunteers age, they start to struggle with more physical tasks. One emerging belief is that Friends Groups should not be replacing park management teams by taking over maintenance – instead they should be complementing their activities, adding value (Holifield and Williams, 2014; Parks Action Group, 2019).

Improving or enhancing the space / facilities, features in most publications (Jones 2002b; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Holifield and Williams, 2014; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018) with *"Improving and Maintaining the Space"* ranked as the first priority for groups in the GreenSpace Community survey (2012). Jones (2002b) identified facility improvement as one of two key methods used by Friends Groups to 'entice' more people into the park.

Improving the environment for wildlife or biodiversity was only mentioned by two studies (GreenSpace Community survey, 2012; Walker, 2016). In the cited survey this was

ranked as the second priority for Friends Groups - this warrants more investigation, as much of the literature does not mention this type of activity. Attitudes to wildness and nature revealed in this study are presented in Chapter 7 'the place domain' and discussed in Chapter 9.

'Promoting the Space' to increase usage was mentioned by many (Jones, 2002b; Holifield and Williams, 2014; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018). This includes education, putting on events and promoting the place's history. One survey (GreenSpace Community, 2012) found more than 80% of groups promoted the space, with 76% running events, whilst NFPGS (2021) had similar findings, with 90% of groups running small events and 48% larger ones. This type of activity appears relatively uncontroversial with no issues identified in the literature – perhaps because it is clearly 'added value' and therefore not replacing park management.

Advocacy with the local authority, or holding them to account (Walker, 2016) is also a common activity type. 82% of groups report maintenance issues to the local authority and 86% liaise with them (NFPGS, 2021). Protecting the space, for example from being sold for development, is a particularly unique aspect of the Friends Group role (Lee, 2018). Lee (2018) observed that when other organisation types took over from Friends Groups, they fulfilled many of their roles and responsibilities but not the protection aspect. He argued this was because Friends Groups are independent from statutory bodies, not reliant on them for funding, and therefore better able to oppose decisions.

Making the spaces safer and more secure, with less antisocial behaviour and vandalism, is a key aspect of the Friends Groups role (Jones, 2002b; Holifield and Williams, 2014; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018; Whitten, 2019; NFPGS, 2021). Ensuring security, Jones (2002b) found, is one of the key ways groups entice more users into parks. Mechanisms for this include being the 'eyes and ears' (surveillance), acting as enforcers (confronting bad behaviour) and by 'owning' the space, thus deterring negative behaviour. Groups can also teach young people how to be 'good citizens,' thus reducing potential negative behaviour (Jones, 2002b).

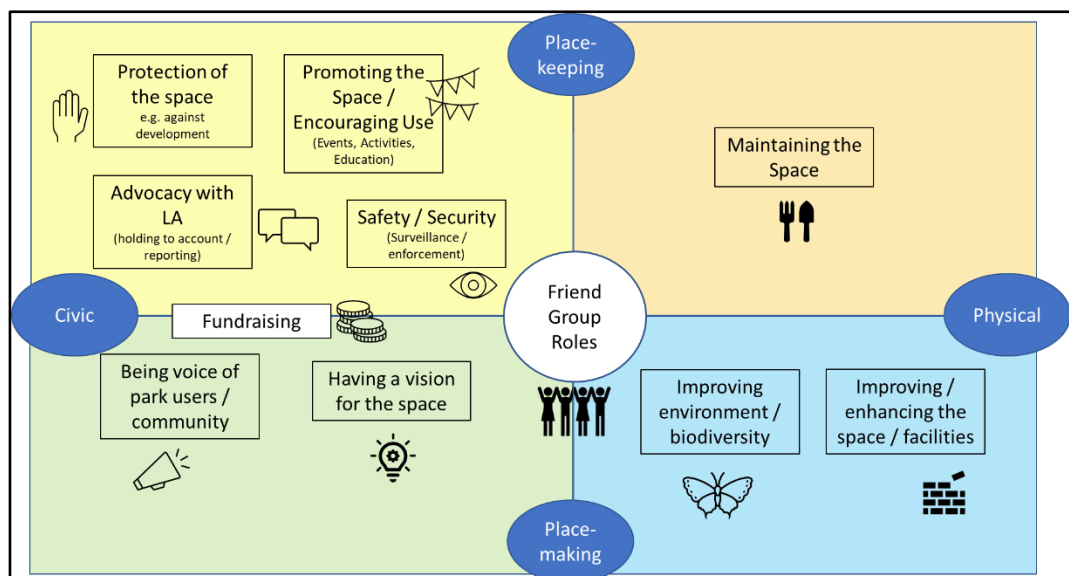
Fundraising is also key (Walker, 2016). One survey found 84% of groups apply for funding (NFPGS, 2021), whilst another found 71% did (GreenSpace Community, 2012). Being the voice of park users or the community (Baker et al., 2010; Lee, 2018; NFPGS, 2021) and having a vision for the space (Walker, 2016) are also part of their remit, involving feeding into decision making processes with authorities.

Positioning of activity types

To aid understanding, a diagram was developed that illustrates figuratively how the various activity types undertaken by Friends Groups fit, in relation to each other, and with categories and concepts from the wider literature (Dempsey and Burton, 2012; Fors et al., 2015; Mathers et al., 2015). See Figure 2.1. The axes are based on four classifications of activity, as described by Fors et al. (2015) in their literature review on participation in urban green spaces (see Chapter 3, ‘public participation’). These have been used here to position the identified activities of Friends Groups.

The horizontal axis denotes whether the activity is physical or civic. The former directly affects the space (e.g. construction / maintenance) and is more ‘hands on,’ whilst the latter requires additional steps to affect the space (e.g. input into design / lobbying) and is more about interacting with and influencing others. The vertical axis denotes the phase of activity, place-making or place-keeping, as conceptualised by Wild et al. (2008) cited in Dempsey and Burton (2012). The former relates to the early stages of a project when places are being created, whilst the latter relates to on-going, long-term management. Nam and Dempsey argue that place-making often *“takes centre stage”* whilst place-keeping is *“often taken for granted”* (2019, p2).

Figure 2.1: Roles and responsibilities of Friends Groups, identified in literature review (Woodward, 2023)



When classifying the activity types, it was relatively straightforward deciding on whether something was civic or physical. However it was more challenging deciding on whether something fitted into place-keeping or making, as some activity types could be either or both. 'Improving facilities' for example, depending on the specifics and the scale of the activity, could be place-making or keeping; installing a new play-park or building a new café for example fits more in the former, whereas something smaller like establishing a new flower-bed fits better in the latter. Similarly, fundraising and 'having a voice' could arguably fit into either phase, depending on what the campaigns are focused on (new developments or maintenance). In these instances, a judgement was taken by the researcher as to where the activity type fitted best. Improving facilities, for example, was positioned within place-making, as it was felt it related more to change and renewal than pure maintenance, whereas fundraising was placed in-between. This highlights the importance of understanding more about the specific activities, as top-line information can be ambiguous.

Given these challenges, when inspecting Figure 2.1 as a whole it appears that more of the activity types fit within the place-keeping phase, reflecting the more long-term nature of their involvement (Dempsey and Burton, 2012; Mathers et al., 2015). In addition, more of the activity types are civic (n=7), as opposed to physical (n=3). This is important as, arguably, Friends Groups are often more associated with the latter. However, as this categorisation does not include the amount of time dedicated to each activity, this cannot be used to rank importance. Overall therefore, the diagram is useful in drawing attention to the wide diversity of activities that Friends Groups do, across types and phases, but has limitations in terms of establishing relative importance.

Responsibility

How much responsibility Friends Groups desire features in the literature. The scale of activity that groups undertake varies widely from performing relatively minor tasks, to managing the space wholesale (Whitten, 2019). Four publications, three UK based (Mathers et al., 2015; Walker, 2016; Parks Action Group, 2019) and one USA (Baker et al., 2010), argue that Friends Groups see their role as supplementing or complementing park management, not substituting or replacing their services *"some groups are hesitant, under-skilled and /or unprepared to take on (further) management responsibilities"* (Mathers et al., 2015, p134). GreenSpace Community survey (2012) largely endorses this point of view. Over two-thirds of 'all groups' (approximately half are Friends Groups, the

others being conservation or environmental groups – see earlier) said they did not wish to take on more responsibility. The main reasons for this (ranked in order, for Friends Groups specifically) were time/capacity, not enough volunteers and funding concerns. Lesser reasons included liability issues, skills/training, unwillingness and lacking political support. 31% said they would be interested in taking on great responsibility, these tended to be newer groups, with more members.

To summarise, this literature review reveals that Friends Groups roles and responsibilities are diverse and can be categorised into ten ‘types’. Some are about affecting the space indirectly (civic), whilst others are more direct (physical). Some are associated with long-term care ‘place-keeping’, whilst others relate to new developments ‘place-making’. There is however a lack of evidence regarding the amount of time / energy dedicated to different aspects, how this might vary by group and what influences this. A lack of consistency in how types are classified, along with a lack of specific information is also evident. This study adds to the evidence on roles and responsibilities, by spending time with individual groups, seeking to understand their activities in detail and ascertaining what influences their decisions. The results of this are presented in Chapter 6, ‘activities’.

Benefits and successes

There is relatively little published information on the benefits and successes of Friends Groups.

Townsend (2006) focuses on the health and wellbeing benefits of taking part in civic environmentalism in Australia, with some findings specific to Friends Groups. Qualitative results show that participation led to increased physical health (activity, weight control, respiratory benefits), mental health (reduced stress, mental relaxation, shared fun) and social health (a sense of belonging and connectedness, widened social circle, opportunity to contribute). Civic environmental participants also felt more secure in their neighbourhood. Quantitative data was however not reported in the studies involving Friends Groups. The mechanisms for these benefits are; satisfactory human relationships, meaningful occupation, opportunities for contact with nature and for creative expression and opportunities for making a positive contribution to human society. Taking part gave participants a sense of achievement and pride with tangible, worthwhile outcomes. It also gave them opportunities to meet and connect with others and the environment.

One USA study (Baker et al., 2010) attempted to 'measure' the success of Friends Groups. This USA study investigated important characteristics of community-based organisations and their role in land management with the authors defining success into three categories: effectiveness (of the programmes and activities), achievement of goals and relationship with the National Park Service (the relevant authority). The level of success was scored by researchers from 1 – 5 and an average score generated. This was used to identify the level of success of the organisations so that characteristics leading to this could be ascertained. A similar approach is taken in this study, albeit with different success categories, see Chapter 6, 'success'.

Walker's MSc thesis (2016) identified eight success factors for Friends Groups; political support, responsive management (from parks team), persistence, partnership working with local authority, legitimacy, expertise, fundraising success and independence from the local authority. Some relate to the internal characteristics of the group (e.g. persistence), whilst others are outside of their control (e.g. political support). All interact with each other. Whilst these are a useful starting point, they are based on one case study, which has not been peer-reviewed. Exploring these in more detail is therefore warranted, and forms a major part of this study (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8).

Relationship with local authority

Most UK Friends Groups operate in sites owned by a local authority (GreenSpace Community, 2012). The literature is unequivocal that the success of Friends Groups relies, at least partly, on having a positive working relationship with park managers, involving two-way commitment and active collaboration (Jones 2002a and b; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Parks Action Group, 2019; NFGPS, 2021).

The role of park managers, in terms of supporting Friends Groups, is many faceted. It includes encouraging and supporting groups and celebrating their achievements (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; NFGPS, 2021) as well as providing guidance, advice and training (GreenSpace Community, 2012; NFGPS, 2021). Practically it also includes ensuring access to equipment and facilities (GreenSpace Community, 2012; NFGPS, 2021). Ideally, the skills each party provides complement each other; the local authorities provide project management and professional expertise whilst the Friends Groups provide additional time, knowledge and funding (Mathers et al., 2015). Support is especially important at the beginning of a group's lifecycle whilst their skills and

confidence develop (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2014). Lee (2018) says the local authorities' role is to foster and facilitate.

Jones examined how best to manage Friends Groups from the perspective of local authorities (2002a). A three-stage process of 'Resource Expanding' was outlined, including recommended strategies to overcome potential issues. Stage 1 'Managing Initiation' is when the need for change in how parks are managed is recognised, the local authority identifies internal champions, be-friends the community and they start to work together. Stage 2 'Backward Behaviouring' is when the process of co-operation begins, with the local authority aiming to reduce 'dependent behaviour'. There may be hostility towards the local authority during this stage, recommended strategies to counter this include recruiting key local people, empathising and communicating to increase optimism, and keeping the group task-focused. Stage 3 'Forward Behaviouring' is when a collaborative relationship is established, with the community becoming less reliant on the local authority and the park management role becoming one of facilitating, guiding and mentoring.

One observation is that, whilst the study captured the perspectives of both Friends Groups and park management, the emphasis is very much on how the local authority can utilise Friends Groups to improve efficiency and gain resources. This fits closely to what is described as Instrumental participation (White, 1996), it being a means to an end, as opposed to Representative or Transformative participation, whereby communities gain voice and influence and become empowered to make their own decisions. This concept is discussed more in Chapter 4. Indeed, Jones (2002a) identifies one potential issue of 'stretching,' whereby Friends Groups, having been encouraged and facilitated by the local authority, become emboldened and demand more resources, rather than less. The groups therefore are not always participating in the way the local authority had envisaged. Little attention is paid to inequality, though the author comments that 'council-reliant behaviour' is more evident in deprived areas, and this makes it harder to progress as envisaged in this model. The process described therefore may fit better with some communities, compared to others.

The literature reveals however, that the reality of the working relationship between local authorities and Friends Groups is more mixed and complicated than the aspirations.

The Parks Action Group say that whilst there is a willingness to collaborate in principle, the reality is "*complex and patchy*," often with tensions (2019, p4). Walker (2016) identifies having responsive park management as a key success factor yet found much variation,

with some being very positive towards Friends Groups and others very negative. Mathers et al., (2015) agree that local authority support can be inadequate, with a lack of consultation or communication. They identify factors influencing the success of these partnerships relating to the individual parties involved (their motivations, skills and abilities), the individual groups / departments, wider contextual factors and the relationship between members. As such, many interacting variables affect partnership capacity. These mixed messages regarding the relationship between local authorities and community groups are supported by GreenSpace Community (2012). Whilst 87% of survey respondents were kept well informed by the local authority and most (70%) had a 'good' or 'excellent' relationship with them, a 'lack of local authority support' was ranked as their third greatest fear or challenge (after funding and membership), cited by 40% of Friends Groups. Interestingly, this 2012 report concludes that forthcoming budget cuts to local authorities could negatively impact on their ability to build / maintain these relationships in the future.

Poor relationships stem from park management not dedicating enough time, effort and commitment to building and maintaining them (Jones, 2002b; Baker et al., 2010; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018; Parks Action Group, 2019; Whitten, 2019). Reasons for this fit into three main areas; a lack of resources, a lack of training / expertise and the attitudes / mind-set of staff.

A lack of resources, including staff time and money, affects the ability of park managers to invest in building relationships with Friends Groups (Speller and Ravenscroft, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018; Whitten, 2019; Parks Action Group, 2019). Developing effective working relationships involves hard work and can be inconvenient in terms of working hours (Jones, 2002a). It costs money to support groups yet volunteer management budgets have been cut, especially since austerity (Whitten 2019).

There is also a lack of expertise and training for park staff in how to work with communities and public participation in general (Jones, 2002b; Walker, 2016; Whitten, 2019). Harnessing community assets, Jones notes, is a skilled task but most local authorities lack a clear plan of how to encourage their involvement, expecting groups to "*just emerge*" in a "*hit and miss*" way (2002b, p30). More research into how Friends emerge, how their skills can be harnessed and the role of local authorities in this is called for. This study focuses on this aspect of Friends Groups in detail, with relevant results in Chapters 7 'the process domain' and throughout Chapter 8.

Attitudinal aspects for the relationship difficulties were also found to exist. Both Whitten (2019) and Jones (2002b) describe how some local authorities have a paternalistic approach towards Friends Groups. They see themselves as the experts and that, by working with communities, they are giving away their own power, or having it taken from them. This can lead to them becoming tense and defensive and, Whitten (2019) argues, giving Friends Groups responsibility without empowerment. Mathers et al. (2015) cite historical and political legacies for some local authorities struggling to work with communities, also saying that some park managers see themselves as ‘owning’ the green space.

The mindset of park managers, and their way of working, can often be at odds with community engagement (Jones, 2002b). They are used to working in a prescriptive and contractual way that is bureaucratic, hierarchical, often involving conflict, whereas community engagement requires a *“softer approach based on collaboration, collegiality and flexibility”* and this can be a *“culture shock”* (p30). The personality of park staff can also be unsuited to working with communities. They are often introverted, Jones says, and find facing hostility from the community difficult, even *“traumatic”* (2002b).

The need for Friends Groups to be understood and respected is emphasised (Parks Action Group, 2019; NFPGS, 2021). Jones (2002a) says groups need to “sense” commitment from park management and, if it is lacking, they realise.

This section highlights the importance of Friends Groups and local authorities having a positive working relationship, yet this is not always the situation in reality. This is attributed to a lack of time, commitment and attention given to relationship building, by park management. Barriers include a lack of resource, a lack of training/expertise, a paternalistic attitude amongst park staff and a way of working that does not always ‘fit’ the needs of community engagement. This study explores this issue in-depth, attempting to understand both the causes of these relationship difficulties, as well as potential solutions, using case-studies that include groups with a variety of working relationships (see Chapter 8).

Issues and recommendations

Key issues relating to Friends Groups involvement in urban green space, as identified in the literature are now presented. Some have already been discussed and will therefore

only be mentioned briefly. Those that have not, will be covered in more detail. Any suggested recommendations to address these issues are presented alongside.

Membership issues are mentioned by a number of publications. Groups often rely heavily on a small number of committed Friends and struggle to find people who are willing to take on responsibilities (Jones, 2002b; Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019). This can make groups fragile. More broadly, finding new volunteers and getting the community involved is an issue (Parks Action Group, 2019; Nam and Dempsey, 2019). In the GreenSpace Community survey (2012) membership issues were ranked by groups as their second biggest challenge. There are few recommendations associated specifically with this issue, though Lee (2018) suggests having a clear policy of recruiting new members whilst Baker et al. (2010) and the Parks Action Group (2019) suggest that links to other groups could provide peer support and 'back-up'.

Related to this is the issue of representation in Friends Groups. Many authors say groups lack diversity in terms of ethnicity and age (Mathers et al., 2015; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Haqqani, 2022). This, Mathers et al. (2015) says, could lead to the interests of a few being favoured over the whole community. Haqqani (2022) conducted research with groups that had successfully recruited ethnic minority members. Twelve recommendations to increase representation were made including understanding the local context, recruiting ethnic minority people into the core group, establishing partnerships and links with diverse organisations, more diverse park management staff, encouraging ethnic minority visitors to set up their own groups, and linking with schools and youth clubs. The only specific recommendation relating to young people's involvement was from Nam and Dempsey (2019) who suggested adapting governance arrangements to bring more young people in.

The sustainability of groups is raised as a concern by Mathers et al. (2015), Whitten (2019) and Lee (2018). Groups can lack long term commitment and start to fall apart once their initial outcomes are achieved (Whitten, 2019). Mathers et al. (2015) concur saying it is harder to keep groups engaged with place-keeping, as opposed to place-making, whilst Lee (2018) talks more generally about how groups can 'ebb and flow'. Holifield and Williams (2014) state that the sustainability of groups can be associated with location and park type – larger, more suburban parks (compared with inner-city ones) tend to have Friends Groups that remain active for longer. Recommendations associated with this include supporting peer learning networks or forums and more skills training (Baker et al., 2010; Parks Action Group, 2019) plus succession planning (Lee, 2018). Walker (2016) states that groups need to have persistence, fundraising success and expertise,

especially in community organising, to succeed. The issue of sustainability – and indeed support networks – is discussed more in Chapter 3 ‘civic ecology’.

A number of issues relating to the internal management of Friends Groups are identified by Jones (2002a). These include members falling out with each other ‘inward storming’ and “*moaning sessions*” with unproductive, negative behaviour. Local authorities should not get too involved in these disputes, he says, though they can encourage groups to focus on tasks and problem solving instead.

Friends Groups predilection to think/act locally is identified as an issue by Whitten (2019) and Mathers et al. (2015). This is an issue that runs counter to some agendas, such as climate change, biodiversity and travel, that require a more regional perspective (Whitten, 2019). In addition, it can lead to groups competing with each other, rather than together (Mathers et al., 2015). Particularly active or successful groups can then draw in disproportionate resources (time and funding) from the local authority, thus impacting on inequality (Whitten, 2019). No particular recommendations are associated with these issues, other than a call from the Parks Action Group (2019) for local authorities to have a long-term vision for parks and green spaces.

A lack of secure funding for Friends Groups was identified as a key issue (Baker et al., 2010; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Whitten, 2019) and was ranked as the biggest challenge by groups in the GreenSpace Community survey (2012). Designating parks a statutory service with appropriate funding and protection is recommended by the Parks Action Group (2019) and Nam and Dempsey (2019).

Differing expectations of Friends Groups roles and responsibilities also emerge as an issue. Both the Parks Action Group (2019) and Mathers et al. (2015) state that whilst national and local government policy may wish for communities to take on more responsibility – and even core maintenance – not every Friends Groups is able or willing to do this.

Many of the issues associated with Friends Groups relate to their relationship with parks teams based within local authorities. Much of this, in terms of how this relates to a lack of support and commitment from local authorities towards Friends Groups (for the reasons stated earlier), has already been discussed. Specific recommendations are lacking in this area, though some authors talk about the need for local authorities to support, value and respect Friends Groups, and to embrace partnership working and community engagement in general (Parks Action Group, 2019; NFPGS, 2021). Training for local authorities on community engagement is suggested by Walker (2016) whilst Speller and Ravenscroft

(2014) say local authorities need to recognise that building a positive relationship takes time, commitment and should be perceived as an “*educative process*” with groups needing both structure and agency to progress.

A number of issues and concerns therefore exist in terms of Friends Groups work to improve and maintain green spaces. Some relate specifically to the groups themselves (e.g. membership, representation, sustainability, internal clashes) whilst other issues are broader and relate more to the model itself – for example, the ability (or not) of local authorities to effectively support the groups, their local nature and the expectations others have of them. Some recommendations are given in the literature but they tend to be quite broad e.g. valuing Friends Groups and providing adequate funding for green spaces, that are potentially difficult for organisations to act on. This study aims to suggest more specific recommendations that are practicable for organisations to implement (see Chapter 10).

Summary of evidence and gaps

This section sought to ascertain the evidence relating to Friends Groups and their role in maintaining and improving urban green space. A limited number of quality studies were found. Those that had been peer reviewed, were dominated by two or three quality UK studies, one of which was published over 20 years previously, leading to concerns over regarding current relevance. Much of the grey literature was produced by organisations that advocate for Friends Groups and, as such, there is a risk of bias. Whilst the surveys provide some insights, the lack of consistency in how numbers are generated and presented, plus the opaqueness of the methods involved reduces their reliability and usefulness.

Much of the literature is written from the perspective of how local authorities can best manage urban green spaces. Whilst this is a valid line of enquiry, there is a lack of information on the perspective of Friends Groups members – their motivations, the impact on them and how they perceive their involvement. There is very little research written from a public health or health promotion perspective.

Significantly there is a notable gap in terms of evidence relating to inequality, including information on the distribution of Friends Groups (by for example neighbourhood or deprivation), who gets involved – and how this might impact on green space provision.

The literature that is available almost assumes homogeneity and does not consider how individuals and neighbourhoods might affect the efficacy of the model. It is these gaps that this study sets out to investigate.

Chapter 3: Green Space Volunteering Literature Review

This chapter shifts emphasis, broadening out to incorporate other fields of enquiry related to volunteering in green spaces. These overlap with Friends Groups but also include other styles and ways of volunteering. The emphasis is on drawing out and discussing key learnings from these concepts that are relevant to this study. As such, the approach to this section of the literature review is more ‘light-touch,’ using a narrower range of sources to introduce ideas and concepts (Grant and Booth, 2009). Two specific types of volunteering, namely environmental volunteering and guerrilla gardening are discussed first, before moving onto examine the ideas of civic ecology and public participation.

Environmental volunteering

A body of literature exists, located within health disciplines, that looks at various aspects of environmental volunteering, especially the benefits of it for participants. Friends Groups are, fundamentally, a type of environmental volunteering and this is therefore relevant. A systematic review of this literature was conducted by the European Centre for Environment and Human Health (Lovell et al., 2015; Husk et al., 2016). This assessed the evidence for the health and wellbeing impact of participating in ‘environmental enhancement and conservation activities’ (EECA), arising from the process of participation. It included published peer-reviewed and ‘grey’ literature, and, with the assistance of expert advisors, developed a conceptual model.

32 papers (ten qualitative, ten quantitative and three mixed method) reporting on 23 interventions were included, most (16/23) UK based, with others from Australia, Canada and the USA. Most were structured programmes i.e. they last a set amount of time, with consistent timeslots and are managed by an organisation. ‘Green Gym’ featured regularly, as an example, consisting of group gardening or conservation sessions, delivered by The Conservation Volunteers. Friends Groups are part (but not all) of two included publications, see Chapter 2 ‘benefits’ (Townsend 2004 and 2006). The structured nature of the evaluated interventions means there are differences between this type of volunteering and Friends Groups, whose involvement is open-ended and self-managed, however findings relating to benefits are still potentially relevant.

The quality of all the quantitative studies was assessed as ‘poor’ and the variation in measures used meant a planned meta-analysis could not be undertaken. Despite this, it was concluded that, there are *“tentative indications that environmental enhancement and*

conservation activities may have some benefit to the health and wellbeing of those participating” (Lovell et al., 2015, p14). Some studies found positive and significant outcomes for physical activity, mental health and wellbeing, quality of life and social function. Negative outcomes, one for mental health and another for quality of life, emerged from two. Since this review the evidence base has built further, for example, an evaluation of volunteering with The Wildlife Trusts found significant wellbeing improvements, plus improved positivity, nature relatedness, self-reported health and physical activity (Rogerson et al., 2017).

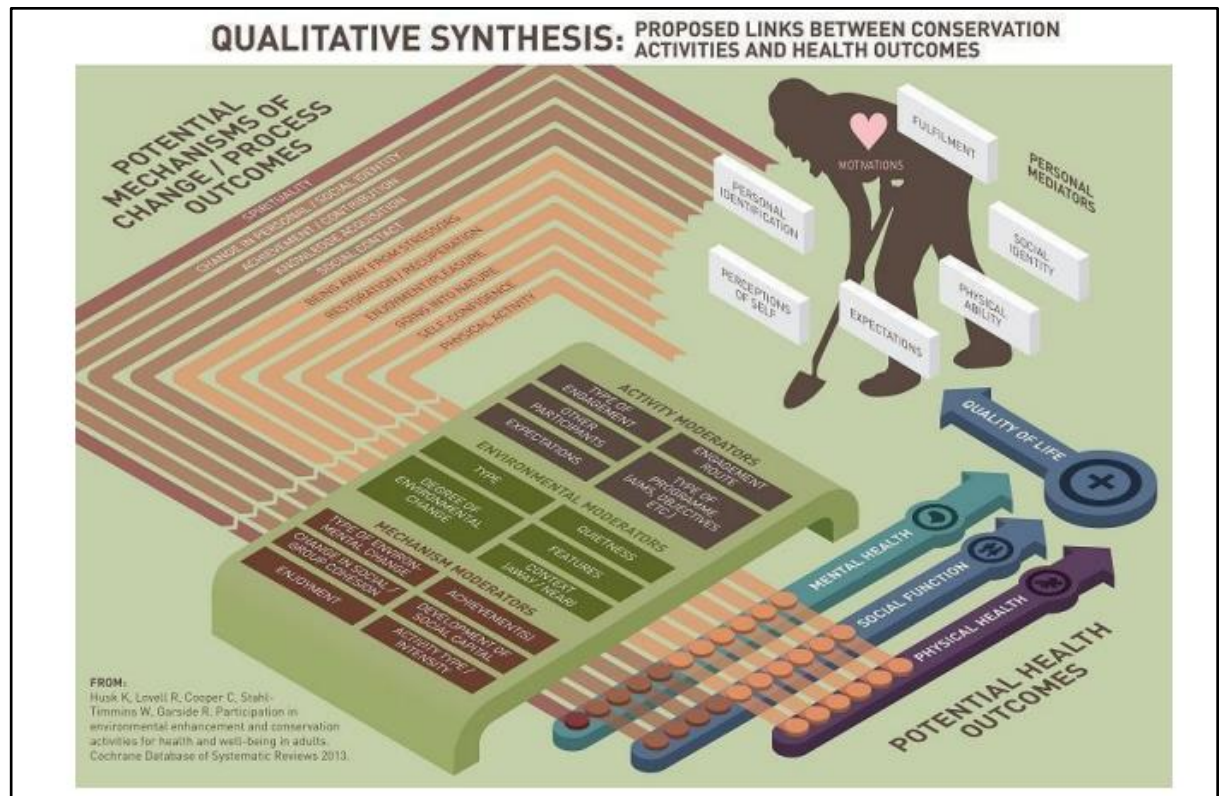
The qualitative findings were more positive, with consistency of themes across included studies. Most participants perceived their health and wellbeing had improved, with better fitness, feeling calmer, lower stress-levels, a more positive outlook, greater self-worth, enhanced resilience and tranquillity emerging regularly. One theme of particular relevance to Friends Group, was that of achievement / reward – wellbeing benefitted from ‘giving back’ to society / the environment, from seeing tangible changes to it, and the ensuring pride that came from these changes. Satisfaction, from contributing to a larger movement, also emerged. Some negative feelings emerged; in two studies participants discussed feeling a sense of obligation or futility that negatively affected their wellbeing – they continued to volunteer despite this, due to their perceived responsibilities.

These findings suggest that some of the activities that Friends Groups undertake, especially those relating to maintaining and improving the green spaces (see Chapter 2, ‘roles and responsibilities’) could lead to improvements in individual health, wellbeing and quality of life. Though there are also suggestions (albeit less common) of potential negative impacts relating to feeling obligated or overwhelmed. In this study therefore, when participants were asked about the impact on themselves of being part of a Friends Group, a prompt relating to potential negative aspects was included (see Chapter 5, ‘data collection with Friends Groups’).

Conceptual model

The review (Husk et al., 2016) produced a potential conceptual model (Figure 3.1) that links participation in EECA to health and wellbeing outcomes via eleven mechanisms and three types of moderators. The four outcomes (mental health, social function, physical health plus quality of life) were identified by the quantitative data and the pathways to these via the qualitative data, additional evidence and expert opinion.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework representing potential health and wellbeing impacts from participation in EECA. (Taken from Husk et al. 2016, p38)



The mechanisms of change explain how participation affects health. Four of these, physical activity, being in nature, social contact and achievement / contribution, were considered especially important, and this is supported by evidence from other studies. The other seven proposed mechanisms are spirituality, change in personal / social identity, knowledge acquisition, being away from stressors, restorative / recuperative, enjoyment / pleasure, self-confidence. Moderators are factors that influence this pathway, for example, the environment in which the activity takes place could impact on mental health or the type of activity could affect the physical health benefits. Considering this in relation to Friends Groups it appears likely that many of the identified pathways hold true. Friends will, by participating, experience many of the described mechanisms, especially feeling a sense of achievement / contribution, improved social contact, being physically active, knowledge acquisition and self-confidence. And, if this model is correct, they will then experience the described benefits.

There are however some differences, that necessitate care if applying this model to Friends Groups. One is that the Friends Groups role is broader than just EECA. As discussed previously (see Chapter 2, 'roles and responsibilities') it also includes civic

duties such as fundraising, organising events, protecting the space etc. Some of the mechanisms described therefore e.g., ‘being in nature’, ‘physical activity’ and ‘away from stressors’ do not apply to some aspects of their role. Friends Groups also potentially experience more challenges than programme participants (see Chapter 2 ‘issues and recommendations’ and ‘relationship with local authority’). Some of the identified issues could potentially be incorporated within the model’s moderators (e.g. expectations) but not all. Finally, whilst self-confidence is included in the model as a mechanism, empowerment is not. Considering the high levels of responsibility that some Friends Groups have, if this model was to be used for this type of volunteering, this needs consideration.

To summarise therefore this conceptual framework applies to some aspects, mainly the more physical activities, of Friends Groups and helps identify important aspects of participation that lead to benefits. However, it is not fully comprehensive and does not cover the breadth of their role and the additional responsibilities they have compared to EECA. Care needs to be taken therefore to not over-generalise from this review to argue that being part of a Friends Groups necessarily leads to the benefits described.

The next section discusses guerrilla gardening a type of volunteering activity in green spaces, but with a very different ethos to EECA.

Guerrilla gardening

This section briefly describes the guerrilla gardening movement and ascertains what learnings from it may be relevant to this study. It draws from a book about the movement written by an activist and key proponent of it (Reynolds, 2008).

Guerrilla gardening can be defined as the *“illicit cultivation of someone else’s space”* (Reynolds, 2008, p13). It can be modest, discreet and small scale, for example individuals planting bulbs in public spaces, or it can be larger scale, more obvious and flamboyant e.g. groups taking over ‘vacant lots’ (unused land). Guerrilla gardeners aim to beautify the area and/or provide food, generally on neglected land, hence the rallying cry *“let’s fight the filth with forks and flowers”* (Reynolds, 2008, p1). Permission to garden is deliberately not sought as it is likely to be refused, is often more trouble than it is worth and, as the impact is positive, improving the area for everyone, it is not thought necessary. This anarchic aspect of the movement is emphasised by the language used to describe it. The analogy of guerrilla warfare is used; it is a ‘battle’, by ‘ordinary people’ who are ‘fighting’ for better

access to land for gardening, so they can create “*beauty and productivity*” (Reynolds, 2008, p52). A strong sense of injustice about the unequal and unfair distribution of land drives the movement, with Reynolds saying 69% of UK land is owned by 0.3% of the population, and that much of the land owned by others is not used. Many people living in urban areas are therefore deprived of space to garden, something Reynolds regards as a ‘natural human instinct’.

Many activities undertaken by guerrilla gardeners, such as clearing up spaces, removing litter, landscaping, planting flowers and edible plants, are similar to those undertaken by Friends Groups. Both are also driven by the aim of improving neglected urban green spaces for the wider community. One key difference however, is that whilst Friends Groups seek to work within the system and engage constructively with authorities, guerrilla gardeners work outside of it, challenging the status quo and breaking the rules and conventions regarding land ownership. They take control without permission, whilst Friends Groups seek to share control with authorities. Their rationale for not seeking permission perhaps endorses the findings regarding how challenging the relationship can be between Friends Groups and local authorities (see Chapter 2).

Guerrilla gardening often occurs in ‘fringe’ areas, such as roundabouts, verges or the spaces around street trees, generally in ‘land-poor’ urban areas. This increases the provision of quality green space, addressing the issue of ‘scarcity’. Targeting spaces where their activities are unlikely to be contentious is suggested by Reynolds (2008) as this means they are less likely to come into conflict with local authorities. This includes land with unclear ownership or neglected public land, this is often the smaller informal green spaces, Reynolds says, as authorities, focus their limited resources on larger flagship parks. As most Friends Groups operate in more formal parks (see Chapter 2) this approach to lessening conflict is generally not possible for them. However, in this study participating groups operated in both informal green spaces and in traditional parks; how this affected success is discussed in Chapter 7 ‘the place domain’.

The cited benefits of guerrilla gardening include improved physical, mental and social health for participants, thus overlapping with the findings from the environmental volunteering section. In addition, Reynolds (2008) believes that a particular benefit of this style of volunteering is the ‘camaraderie’ that comes from ‘warfare’. This idea is of interest, given Friends Groups campaigning role, that involves working together, often against the authorities, to protect the space (see Chapter 6, ‘activity type’).

Reynold's main focus however is on the benefits guerrilla gardening brings to the wider community, for example, providing calm, social spaces where people can both reflect and come together to enjoy the space and other's company. The improvement of neglected spaces positively impacts the whole community by increasing pride in the area, encouraging people to leave their houses and socialise and reducing crime / anti-social behaviour. Removing litter is critical as it is 'contagious'. The commercial benefits of guerrilla gardening are also cited – attractive planting can encourage people to linger longer and shop / eat out. The fact it can also raise property / rental prices, via 'gentrification,' is acknowledged as problematic as existing tenants, who may have instigated the improvements, could become 'priced out' of the area. Many of these broader benefits, and indeed the issue of gentrification, could also apply to Friends Groups but are less well explored within the literature (see Chapter 2). In Chapter 6, 'success' many of the achievements of Friends Groups relate to these wider benefits.

Reynolds gives practical advice for guerrilla gardeners on how to 'gather troops' or engage with local people. Recruiting more people provides necessary labour and, having local support, protects the garden from antisocial behaviour and from the authorities taking the land back. This is relevant for Friends Groups as, whilst one of their key issues is a lack of members, few practical recommendations to address this are suggested (see Chapter 2, 'issues and recommendations'). Key strategies suggested by Reynolds include holding conversations with interested passers-by, making the most of casual opportunistic encounters, and using media (social and traditional) to communicate positive stories about the changes made.

Despite operating in fringe, neglected areas, the relationship between guerrilla gardeners and authorities can still lead to conflict, due to their illicit status. Reynolds gives advice on how to de-escalate confrontations by staying calm, saying you are just a volunteer doing some gardening, showing the positive changes made and not bringing up any other issues or political debates that might aggravate the situation. People whose roles overlap with the guerrilla gardeners e.g. highways / litter collection can be problematic, as they may be confused by what is being done and therefore defensive. "*Small-minded jobsworths*" who seek to undermine and obstruct can also cause long-term problems (Reynolds, 2008, p187). In this study, how different roles within the authorities affected the relationship dynamic is discussed in Chapter 8 'the Friends Groups perspective'.

Leadership, and its importance for a successful guerrilla gardening group, is emphasised by Reynolds. Leaders should, he says, be informative guides who facilitate others,

encourage discussion and new ideas, and do not behave dogmatically. Some guerrilla gardening leaders appear uncomfortable with their status and deny they are acting in this way, despite showing natural leadership qualities. This is attributed to being *“uncomfortable with the associations of carrying a badge”* (p166), preferring to feel that everyone is equal. Having a local leader increases the likelihood that the garden lasts long-term as otherwise it can become too difficult to maintain. This attention given to leadership, and its important features, is unlike the Friends Group literature where it receives relatively little attention (see Chapter 2). It does however emerge as an important theme in this study (see Chapter 7, ‘the people domain’).

How to legitimize the garden also receives attention. Whilst in some ways this is not relevant to Friends Groups who operate with permission, some of the suggested approaches could help build a positive relationship with authorities. The aim, Reynolds says, is to make it easy for the authorities to say yes to your plans, and difficult for them to say no. This includes showing them the garden when it is looking at its best, using before and after pictures, demonstrating local community support and positive media stories. He also suggests not asking for too much help early on and avoiding being political or critical.

Many similarities between Friends Groups and guerrilla gardeners therefore emerge. This includes their desire to beautify neglected green spaces for the benefit of the wider community and their emphasis on action. Whilst guerrilla gardeners operate in a different, more anarchic way, outside formal systems, some learnings from their approach have relevance to this study. Their decision to not engage with authorities underlines the difficulties associated with voluntary groups working alongside more formal organisations thus building on the literature in Chapter 2, with this study exploring this in detail (Chapter 8). Their advice on how to gain support from local people and authorities, is relevant for Friends Groups and explored more in this study (see Chapter 7 ‘the process domain’) as is how leadership affects success (see Chapter 7 ‘the people domain’).

This chapter now moves on to discussing broader concepts relating to volunteering in public green spaces, first civic ecology and then public participation.

Civic ecology

The concept of civic ecology, as presented by Krasny and Tidball (2015), is now described and discussed. How this relates to Friends Groups, and this particular study, is discussed throughout.

Civic ecology is defined as “*people coming together to recreate and restore*” broken places (pxii, 2015). It involves people – or ‘stewards’ - using their own initiative to undertake environmental activities in their own community. Examples include planting acorns in areas ruined by hurricanes and building a ‘peace’ garden in a violence ridden township. Friends Groups are included as part of this broader international movement, with an important similarity being the emphasis on ‘bottom up’ self-managed local groups.

Civic ecology practices are about re-establishing connections between nature, place and the community, in order to re-build the health of all three (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). This emphasis on the whole system and how each part interacts, contrasts with current academic disciplines that tend to focus on one part, with less consideration of the whole. In environmental volunteering literature, for example, the emphasis is on participant health and wellbeing, and in the Friends Group literature, it is on landscape improvement (Chapter 2).

Civic ecology practices tend to emerge in ‘broken places’. This could have happened suddenly (e.g. a natural disaster) or gradually, in post-industrial urban areas, where disinvestment, neglect and violence have led to economic decline. Such chaotic and negative experiences can, the authors argue, be opportunities to “*let light in*” – just how after a forest fire, new growth appears in the clearings - and greening activities can have a role in re-building. Conversely, they also argue that poverty can be a ‘trap’ with inadequate resources and incivilities stopping communities from being able to innovate, adapt and have a vision. This focus on disadvantaged areas is unlike much of the existing literature on Friends Groups that rarely mentions inequality (Chapter 2). It does however fit well with this study that is centred on deprived neighbourhoods, exploring throughout how aspects of disadvantage affect success (Chapter 7 ‘place and people domains’) and ultimately inequality (Chapter 9).

Two important ‘loves’ encourage the emergence of civic ecology practices (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). The first, biophilia, or ‘love of life’ is theorised to have an evolutionary basis, with humans innately fascinated by the natural world. Urgent biophilia is when those who have experienced devastation have a strong desire to ‘green’ (e.g. refugees or prisoners). Topophilia, or love of a particular place, leads to civic ecology practices

emerging, with people who have a strong sense of place most likely to advocate for it. Memories are also important for building civic ecology practices. A community's memory of how a place once was, can lead to a desire to recreate it (restorative topophilia) and whilst social memories, shared by a group of people, decline over time, new ones can be created by acting together. These ideas link to the literature regarding motivations to participate in Friends Groups (see Chapter 2) but have a more emotive basis. They relate to Friends Groups, as they are strongly associated with a specific place and situated within the natural environment. During this study results relating to these ideas did emerge and are presented in Chapter 7 'place' and 'people' domains.

Many of the stories told by Krasny and Tidball (2015) feature an individual who, despite a negative environment, takes positive action which then inspires others to join in. This leads to an improved environment and sense of community, which leads to other civic ecology practices i.e. a positive feedback loop. However, there is little exploration as to what led that individual to take that initial step. In this study emphasis was placed on ascertaining how and why individuals became involved, in an attempt to fill this knowledge gap (see Chapter 7, 'the people domain').

Community is at the heart of civic ecology. Civic ecology practices can build meaningful community by increasing connections and trust, as people work together to improve the area. However it is also easier to act collectively if meaningful community exists – and in many broken places, where violence and incivility dominate and trust is lacking, this does not. There is therefore a circularity to it - community both develops civic ecology practices and is deployed for it. In this study whether a cohesive community was an explanatory success factor or not was examined, with results presented in Chapter 7 'place domain'.

The health and wellbeing benefits of participating in civic ecology practices are separated by Krasny and Tidball (2015) into 'seeing green' and 'doing green'. 'Seeing green' benefits are threefold - restorative, cognitive and social - with well-evidenced outcomes including reduced stress and anxiety and increased happiness and interactions (see Chapter 1). 'Doing green', the authors argue, confers additional benefits. It enables people to leave a legacy, with value and meaning. It can also build self-efficacy as acts of urban greening can reverse the helplessness and despair that people may feel when living in a broken place. Empowerment can also increase as, by acting together, people are taking an active role in improving their own lives. 'Doing green' also provides opportunities to improve social learning; bringing people together from different backgrounds means they can learn collectively how to decide, adapt and listen. Some of these benefits concur with the

environmental volunteering literature (Husk et al., 2016) but here the emphasis is more on empowerment and improving one's local environment.

Separating the benefits in this way is useful as it emphasises the importance of active involvement, as opposed to passively absorbing greenery. However, no potentially adverse impacts on stewards are noted, for example, if efforts to 'do green' are thwarted by incivilities or lack of interest.

One issue raised by Krasny and Tidball (2015) is that civic ecology stewards rarely measure their efforts due to their action-orientation and implicit belief in the value of their work. This means that the importance of the movement is not always appreciated by policy makers. The authors present a number of recommendations associated with this. One is to use technology to assist e.g. mapping tools. Another is to work with scientists to measure the impact of their work. This needs to appreciate that 'greening' a neighbourhood is not just about that particular task, but also about the community developing collective efficacy (trust, social cohesion and a willingness to act) that can have long-lasting benefits. When measuring impact therefore, both direct (the greening aspect) and indirect benefits (e.g. the process involved such as connections made between people) need to be accounted for. The issue of not measuring impact is relevant to Friends Groups as, if local authorities are unaware of the activities, their scale and their potential importance to the community, they are unlikely to prioritise supporting them. Appreciating the full range of benefits is also unlikely to occur if only parks teams are aware of Friends Groups and their work.

How policy makers can encourage the civic ecology movement to spread from individual practices, into a regional network, as suggested by Krasny and Tidball (2015), is now discussed. Managers of park systems, they say, need to locate and empower stewards within the community plus create a supportive environment that helps expand the impact of these practices, and does not constrain them unnecessarily. This topic closely relates to the literature in Chapter 2 on the relationship between Friends Groups and local authorities but, rather than the emphasis being on 'managing' groups (Jones, 2002a), it is on support, facilitation and empowerment, operating 'bottom up' and not 'top down'.

Policy makers need to understand that each practice starts small and is locally situated within a place, and therefore specific to it. The desire to impose or direct, via top-down policies therefore needs to be constrained and instead, the emphasis should be on finding small practices or stewards and helping strengthen them. After this 'strengthening' phase, they advocate 'expanding and spreading'. This involves spreading awareness so other

potential stewards hear about civic ecology practices and become inspired by them. This leads to them establishing their own practices that may be similar, but with a 'local imprint'. Influence, but not replication, therefore spreads.

'Polycentric governance,' whereby practices are linked to a variety of different types of groups and organisations (locally, regionally and nationally) for support and learning, is critical to this. This could, for example, be other neighbourhood groups who can provide local connections or technical experts. One way of achieving this is for authorities to employ 'scale-crossing brokers' who facilitate connections between individuals, partners and organisations. This collaboration helps ensure practices have access to resources and expertise, and together they can share ideas and become part of a regional system. The right legal and policy framework (for example in relation to land tenancies) also needs to be in place so practices are not 'constrained'.

The idea of 'the bees and the trees' is introduced. Civic ecology practices are the 'bees' – small, active and innovative, whilst bigger organisations (e.g. local authorities) are the 'trees' providing stability, support and help implementing. Rather than a hierarchy, the authors suggest there should be a 'panarchy' involving multiple organisations functioning at different levels– the slower, larger levels higher up to protect, with smaller faster cycles operating below to innovate. Ideas need to be able to flow in both directions. The authors acknowledge that there are often barriers to information moving 'up' from community-based organisations to government. Governments can become fixated on old ideas and resist innovation (the rigidity trap) and often, this is only overcome when a triggering event such as a disaster or revolt occurs. An example of this emerges in this study, presented in Chapter 8 'building collective responsibility'.

The ideal state of the system, the authors say, is not consistent or static, as there will always be cycles of chaos and renewal. What is important is being resilient and adaptable, able to renew or re-organise when needed. Resilience, they say, is aided by social capital, polycentric governance, diversity and mental flexibility. The role of policy makers is to nurture these sources of resilience. This chimes with Mattijssen et al. (2017)'s findings, discussed later in this chapter.

Whilst recognising that the authors are based in the USA and many examples (though not all) come from there, these ideas do feel very relevant to UK Friends Groups and the environment they are operating in. It provides a new way of thinking about the role of policy makers in helping to create a resilient and adaptable regional movement. The picture it paints of multiple organisations interacting and learning from each other is very

different to that of Jones (2002a) where the emphasis is on how local authorities can best manage and utilise Friends Groups. Few examples however are given of governments or authorities that have successfully changed how they operate, and recommendations on how to encourage that shift are lacking. This is a key focus of this study, that explores how authorities, partners and Friends can work together constructively. Examples of organisations that had changed how they worked, and how that happened, are presented in Chapter 8.

The ideas presented by Krasny and Tidball (2015) bear many similarities to asset-based approaches (Hopkins and Ripon, 2015). This concept is discussed more fully in Chapter 4 but involves working in a relational way, that emphasises community strengths and abilities, rather than their needs and deficiencies. These approaches have been criticised for not fully considering the impact of structural inequalities on deprived neighbourhoods and therefore justifying passing responsibilities to communities, who lack the resources to undertake them (Friedli, 2013). Rather than empowering therefore, they could reinforce feelings of powerlessness. Krasny and Tidball (2015) acknowledge similar criticisms, saying that civic ecology could be seen as a way of absolving governments of their responsibilities and passing them onto unpaid volunteers. As they strongly stress the critical role governments have in supporting the movement, they clearly do not do this entirely. However, the issue of what happens in communities where individuals do not step forward, for example, is not fully addressed, leading to concerns that relying too heavily on civic ecology practices could lead to 'gaps' in provision, impacting on health inequalities (see Chapter 1). The authors also say chaos can be an opportunity and this feels in conflict with the values of health promotion that recognise the additional challenges vulnerable communities face and the need for social justice. The dilemma therefore as to whether Friends Groups (a type of civic ecology practice), in reality, contribute to or mitigate against the unequal distribution of green space remains critical, and is explored in detail throughout this study (see Chapter 9 'inequality').

Public participation in urban green space

This section examines literature associated with public (or user) participation in urban green space (UGS) management. The aim is to provide an account of the ideas from a selection of literature in this field of enquiry that have relevance for Friends Groups.

Greater participation is encouraged, by international conventions and policies (WHO, 1986; United Nations, 2023), for a variety of reasons (Fors et al., 2021). It is thought to

lead to greater benefits than just using green space (for participants), better-quality, more appropriate and inclusive green space (for the public), and increased resilience of city-wide systems. It is also thought to reduce park management workloads as the public take on more responsibilities, thus reducing costs. A wide spectrum of activity, from consulting the public about a new design, to citizens managing the space themselves is incorporated within this field of enquiry. It can be just one episode, or a long-term commitment.

The seven papers utilised in this section are all published in peer-reviewed journals, between 2014 and 2021, from landscape, planning or forestry literature. Most are from mainland Europe with some contributions from the UK and the USA. See Appendix 3.1 for a brief overview of each. Included are two systematic reviews (Fors et al., 2015; Fors et al., 2021), two studies using case-study methodology (Mattijssen et al., 2017; Aalbers and Sehested, 2018), one longitudinal mixed method study (Fors et al., 2019), one qualitative study (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014) and one thematic analysis of archival data (Jerome et al., 2017). Process related issues, such as how public participation occurs, the motivations for it and associated challenges are examined, as well as the outcomes and benefits of participation.

Friends Groups fit within this field of enquiry as a specific type of public participation. Whilst they tend not to be mentioned specifically (with the exception of Jerome et al., 2017) many of the featured groups are similar in terms of aims, remit and how they are organised and learnings are therefore relevant.

Approaches

Different ways in which public participation occurs are highlighted by the literature.

As discussed in Chapter 2 'roles and responsibilities' Fors et al. (2015) separates participation into civic and physical. Civic participation, where citizens indirectly affect green space via contributing to decision making, is more commonly studied (15/31 of studies included in the review) whereas physical participation, where citizens directly affect the space, is less commonly studied (9/31 included studies). Participation is also categorised according to when it occurs in green space management. 'Place-making' involves new developments, whilst 'place-keeping', involves longer term maintenance (Dempsey and Burton, 2012; Fors et al., 2015). The former tends to receive more attention than the latter (Mattijssen et al., 2017; Nam and Dempsey, 2019). Fors et al. (2021) propose a 'process cycle' of three phases: analysis, design and implementation.

Friends Groups unlike most approaches, involve both civic and physical participation and operate across all lifecycle phases.

Five different participation approaches are identified by Fors et al. (2021). Three, value mapping, collaborative planning and co-design, are short-term and more associated with the analysis and design phases of management. The 'type' of participation used tends to be 'inform', 'consult' and 'involve'. The other two identified approaches are co-management and community gardening. These operate over the longer-term and utilise 'partnership' or 'empowerment' types of participation. Friends Groups, as characterised in the previous section, fit most closely into the co-management category.

Jerome et al. (2017) categorise UK 'Community-scale green infrastructure' (CSGI) initiatives (local-level green space managed by groups of community volunteers) into typologies: formal groups, informal groups, and formal projects. 'Groups' are established by volunteers, site-focused and local, with the focus on environmental stewardship. Formal groups (the most common category) are constituted and regular, whilst informal groups are more ad hoc, potentially forming for a particular initiative. 'Projects' are run by a voluntary organisation and, whilst they undertake environmental stewardship activities, their principle aim is to improve health and wellbeing or grow food, thus fitting most closely with environmental volunteering. Friends Groups fit within the typology of 'Formal Groups'.

Perceived benefits

A wide variety of potential benefits or advantages are attributed to increased public participation (Fors et al., 2015; Aalbers and Sehested, 2018).

Fors et al. (2015) identify 26 different benefits of / arguments for greater public participation in green space. Some are very precise e.g. 'increased area of green spaces', others less so e.g. 'better green space administration'. This lack of precision and clarity makes it difficult to test their veracity. Aalbers and Sehested (2018) identify twelve main advantages, again covering a wide range from delivering better quality green space, to improved trust between managers and citizens.

The cited benefits affect different aspects of green spaces. Fors et al. (2015) position them according to whether they affect users (13 benefits), administration (or management) (10 benefits) or the green space itself (25 benefits) – or multiple aspects. Empowerment, for example, benefits the user, improved local knowledge the

administration and more trees affect the green space itself. Whether the claimed benefits have been empirically tested is then assessed (Fors et al., 2015).

The authors conclude that despite the importance placed on public participation, there is a lack of evidence that it directly improves green space quality. However there is some evidence that demonstrates users benefit from participating, in terms of increased empowerment, environmental awareness, increased satisfaction with and use of the UGS. Plus the administration benefit from increased local knowledge / learnings and consensus building. These latter aspects potentially indirectly impact the green space, but the authors state more local-level research is needed. This study directly addresses this evidence gap by exploring, in detail, the activities of Friends Groups in their local green spaces and the changes they have brought over time (see Chapter 6 ‘activities’).

Aalbers and Sehested (2018) use a case study to argue that citizens can act as innovators, leading not only to better quality, more diverse and appealing green spaces, but also to authorities changing their perspective on what is possible and potentially future practice. In this narrative two citizens became involved in the re-development of a play area. The municipality initially conducted a standard consultation but the citizens pushed back, proposing a far more radical, inspiring development that, initially, authorities thought was ‘not possible’. Eventually however, via a great deal of hard work involving the time, passion, energy and persistence of the citizens, partnership working and the support of a council officer, this was achieved, to everyone’s great satisfaction. The authors argue that the involvement of citizens led to the council re-assessing what was possible within green spaces, internalising that understanding, and changing their own previously fixed ‘regimes’ (how they operated). The impact of this one initiative therefore spread beyond one space, to other developments. In this study, the dynamic between Friends Groups and parks teams is explored, building on this interesting, albeit singular, case study (see Chapter 8).

One downside identified by Aalbers and Sehested (2018) was the “*heavy burden*” it placed on citizens. Rather than expecting this to happen repeatedly therefore, the authorities need to change how they work – see ‘suggested approaches’ later in this section. In this study, the impact of being an involved citizen is explored in depth, with some thought-provoking findings emerging (see Chapter 8 ‘the Friends Groups perspective’).

Motivations

Citizens' motivations for initiating and / or participating in UGS initiatives were discussed in three papers.

The most common reasons for participants initiating bottom-up public participation (this would include Friends Groups) were identified by Fors et al. (2021) as, in order, 'green space quality', 'environmental', 'social' and 'interest'. This suggests Friends are likely to be driven by a desire to improve the local area first, with their own needs important, but secondary. This finding concurs with Jones (2002b) who argues that passion for the space or area is an important motivator for Friends. Motivations to participate were separated into 'push' and 'pull' factors by Jerome et al. (2017). The former includes a sense of responsibility, wanting to enhance the local environment, their experience of living in a place and for future generations. 'Pull' factors tend to be individual benefits such as improved quality of life, psychosocial aspects and improved health and wellbeing. This is similar to Walker (2016) who argued that 'push' reasons often encourage people to join a Friends Group, but it is the 'pull' reasons that keep them returning. This highlights the importance of exploring motivations at different points in time, something that this study sets out to do (Chapter 1 'aims and objectives'), with results reported in Chapter 7 'people and process domains'.

Fors et al. (2019) attempted to ascertain how individual factors interact with the physical and social environment to explain drivers for participation. Residents of an urban area were encouraged to participate in caring for a newly planted public forest that their houses backed onto. A mixed method longitudinal study collected a wide range of data over seven years. Findings showed that aspects of the physical environment did affect participation, including the height of the trees in the wood (higher trees associated with higher input) and the type of forest 'edge' (semi or open edges increased input, shrubby edges reduced it). Higher trees were more interesting for residents and created 'rooms' beneath the canopies that they could use, thus encouraging participation. Shrubby edges were less inviting, possibly relating to perceived safety, thus reducing participation. Other significant factors included having a garden with horticultural interest, their neighbours' input, being a new resident and having a lower mean age.

Whilst this study, based in one neighbourhood, has limited generalisability, it shows that participation in caring for green spaces is affected by aspects of the individual interacting with the physical and social environment. This has practical implications when setting up a programme, including approaching people with an interest in gardening, with the

anticipation that they may then influence their neighbours. Plus, it shows that aspects of the physical environment could be adapted to increase participation. This ties into other research that found the design of green spaces, distance to them and perceptions of them affect participation (Jerome et al., 2017). In this study, aspects of the space that affected Friends Groups success (including their ability to recruit members) were explored, and in line with this literature, emerged as important themes (Chapter 7 'the place domain').

Authorities' motivations for initiating public participation in UGS were discussed in two papers. The top five reasons identified were, in order, to 'involve', to improve green space quality, 'streamline' (participation), 'environmental' and 'social' (Fors et al., 2021). Molin and van den Bosch (2014) undertook a qualitative study involving ten local authority green space managers in Denmark. Their reasons for encouraging public involvement included democracy, understanding, ownership of spaces (to reduce anti-social behaviour), green space quality and increased knowledge.

Local authority motivations are therefore partly about improving spaces, partly ideological and partly about improving relationships with the community. There is less emphasis on practical reasons (e.g. austerity / saving resources) than might be expected (see Chapter 2 'origins / rationale') but this could relate to where the studies were conducted (mostly mainland Europe) or the context at the time. In this study, parks teams' motivations for involving Friends Groups, and the benefits ensuring from this, were explored, ensuring a detailed UK specific focus (see Chapter 8, 'the local authority perspective').

Barriers

Many barriers to greater public participation in green spaces emerged (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014; Fors et al., 2015; Jerome et al., 2017; Mattijssen et al., 2017; Aalbers and Sehested, 2018; Fors et al., 2021).

Citizens may lack the personal resources needed to participate. This especially affects marginalised groups who often lack the time, knowledge, skills and income to participate (Fors et al., 2021). The time-consuming nature of participation also acts as a deterrent (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014; Aalbers and Sehested, 2018).

Relationships with authorities are the source of many difficulties. Citizens can be sceptical of authorities or lack trust in them, they may offer inadequate support, limited communication / commitment and lack continuity of staff (Fors et al., 2015; Mattijssen et al., 2017). Authorities' bureaucracy and policies also present difficulties for citizens

(Aalbers and Sehested, 2018). Again, some of these barriers particularly affect marginalised groups. Fors et al. (2021) argue that authority demands are often too high or complex for marginalised groups as, to participate successfully, citizens need specific knowledge or connections. The language and communication used can also be off-putting for them. This study explores many of these themes, focusing particularly on groups in disadvantaged areas, thus increasing understanding of these important issues (see Chapters 8 and 9 'inequality').

Within authorities there are also barriers to encouraging public participation. This can include 'silo' thinking and fixed 'regimes' that prevent the move to a management style that allows for public input (see later). There is often a lack of training and expertise in how to work with communities (Aalbers and Sehested, 2018) and staff (and unions) can be resistant, believing citizens lack necessary knowledge and that there are safety issues (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014). The time-consuming nature of public participation also acts as a barrier for authorities; for it to be successful they have to dedicate substantial amounts of time, and this is often under-appreciated (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014). A lack of evidence as to the efficacy of public participation is also a barrier (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014; Fors et al., 2015). This study explored the barriers (attitudinal and practical) for authorities working with Friends Groups but also identified examples where these had been overcome, thus revealing potential ways to address these issues (see Chapter 8 'the local authority perspective'.)

Sustaining participation

Factors affecting citizens' long-term participation in managing green space were explored by Mattijssen et al. (2017). Qualitative case studies were undertaken with three groups in Berlin, Amsterdam and Milan, each of whom had managed a green space for over ten years.

One key factor affecting continuity was 'formalisation and institutionalism'. Having established roles, structures and co-ordination aided stability and continuity, increased their legitimacy and helped fundraising. The second key factor was 'adaptive capacity.' Circumstances inevitably change and citizens need to be able to adapt to this - possessing social and financial capital plus having a network of supporters and volunteers helps with this. The final factor identified is the role of authorities and policy. Whilst the groups are self-governing, they still need authorities to provide long-term commitment with stable and secure policies (e.g. in terms of land tenancy) plus good communication. This

is discussed in more detail below. Long-term continuity therefore depended on aspects of the groups themselves, their ability to adapt, plus the policy environment in which they operate. In this study, factors affecting long-term success for UK Friends Groups were explored in detail, with results presented in Chapter 7 'the process domain'.

Governance / role of authorities

As highlighted above, authorities have an important role in ensuring the long-term success of groups managing green-spaces (Mattijssen et al., 2017) and how they operate can act as a barrier (Aalbers and Sehested, 2018; Fors et al., 2015).

The challenges associated with co-management of green spaces, from the perspective of Danish green space managers, were explored qualitatively by Molin and van den Bosch (2014). Four 'types' or tiers of governance were identified. Hierarchical governance, or governance 'by' government, is how traditional municipalities have operated, with authorities being in control and making decisions. Co-governance can be both 'closed' or 'open' (see below) and involves governance 'with' government, whilst self-governance, is governance 'without' government. Due to policy changes and pragmatic considerations, the Danish green space managers were being encouraged to move from hierarchical to co-governance. This chimes with the UK where the local authorities' role has shifted from the state being in control, to a partnership approach (Chapter 2 'origins/rationale').

Molin and van den Bosch (2014) found that managers embraced some aspects of public participation. However as they had little training or expertise in public involvement, and there were no standard policies, this tended to be ad hoc, with managers relying on their own experiences and preferences. How much control they handed over varied therefore, depending on their perspective, the green space itself and the citizens involved. Managers showed a preference for working with more organised citizens or networks they were already familiar with, whilst citizens with better resources were in a better position to be engaged with. The authors concluded that managers were operating via 'closed co-governance' – whilst the public were involved, the managers selected who was (or was not) included, by acting as 'gate-keepers'. A more strategic approach to engagement is therefore needed, with a greater exchange of expertise, to ensure a greater diversity of citizens are involved. Having preferences as to who they engage with, also emerged in this study, with results presented in Chapter 8 'good vs difficult groups'.

Challenges

A number of substantive challenges associated with public participation were identified.

One is the issue of representation and diversity. International conventions encourage the involvement of marginalised groups (Stec et al. 2000; United Nations, 2023), yet Fors et al. (2021) found that less than half the studies in their review included such groups. Of the five identified approaches (described earlier), community gardening most often included marginalised groups, whilst the planning / design phases were most likely to focus on representation. Co-management approaches (where Friends Groups are situated) are less likely to focus on including marginalised groups or being representative. Mattijssen et al. (2017) comment that all three cases they studied were dominated by older, white members and that this lack of youth and diversity threatened long-term success. This chimes with Friends Group related findings (Mathers et al, 2015; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Haqqani, 2022).

One reason for this lack of representation is that, as discussed earlier, the barriers to participation affect marginalised groups disproportionately (Fors et al., 2021). They are less likely to have the required resources to participate (such as time / skills / specific knowledge) and the processes and communication style used by authorities are especially off-putting for them. Not all citizens therefore are equally able to participate. In addition, the fact that green space managers tend to choose to work with already connected citizens and networks in an unsystematic way, as discussed above, also potentially excludes marginalised groups.

Authorities therefore need to adapt their way of working to be more inclusive, aiming for equity, not equality (Fors et al., 2021). They identify three aspects of green space environmental justice: procedural (i.e. involvement), distributional (i.e. provision) and interactional (i.e. usage). Better public participation improves procedural environmental justice and this could lead to improvements in provision and use. Groups also need to adapt to attract more diverse members (Mattijssen et al., 2017).

A second related issue is that of democracy. One of the aims of public participation is to improve democracy. However, there are concerns (Molin and van den Bosch, 2014) that public participation could lead to power being transferred from a democratic organisation (a local authority) to a small group of potentially unrepresentative citizens. Balancing the needs of the wider community with those that are the most heavily involved is therefore a challenge for green space managers (Molin and van den Bosch , 2014) and arguably public participation as a whole.

Other substantive issues include the big burden it can place on involved citizens (see next section) plus the fact that shifting to a position of co-management is challenging for authorities because of their traditional ways of working.

Suggested approaches to improving public participation

Two proposed approaches to improving public participation in green spaces are described.

Fors et al. (2021) propose a 'cyclic process model' that visualises public participation in green space management. This aims to encourage managers to adopt a more strategic way of working with the public. A series of concentric circles organise the different phases and approaches of participation and relevant 'tools' and types of participation are mapped against these. Tools suggested to aid co-management (where Friends Groups are situated) are; green space management, green space maintenance, socialising, events, fundraising, growing food and recruiting participants.

Aalbers and Sehested (2018) present different strategies or models for upscaling citizen initiatives. 'Fit and conform,' where most initiatives currently are, is where citizens adapt to existing management regimes. Whilst this may encourage innovation and improve green space, it is, the authors say, too great a burden for citizens (who have to battle with fixed regimes and change minds) and there is a weak coherence between initiatives. If these initiatives are just multiplied up, these issues remain. The concept of 'stretch and transform' is therefore proposed. This involves authorities integrating citizens' knowledge into their own practices, via policy advocacy (from the citizens and their own networks). This approach, they suggest, has the potential of leading to green spaces that better reflect citizens knowledge and interests, without conferring the burden on to them, and also affecting green spaces across the region, rather than in individual areas. Implementing this 'shift' requires deep levels of communication (including listening) and collaboration between authorities and citizens.

Summary

The evidence presented in this section shines a light on the many different types of public participation in urban green space. It shows the many different ways, and times, that citizens can be involved. Most of the literature focuses on co-governance, with self-governance (such as guerrilla gardening) receiving less attention.

Evidence regarding physical participation and place-keeping, which is where Friends Groups operate, is more limited than civic / place-making, suggesting that more research is needed in this area. In addition, despite wide-spread acceptance of the notion of public participation, the literature identifies that many of the stated advantages lack convincing evidence. This is particularly true of how participation affects the quality of green space. As authorities need to support the practice for it to work, it is important to build this evidence base.

There is a reasonable amount of evidence relating to motivations for and barriers to participation, though it tends to be fairly generic and focused on initiation. How it varies by different individuals, is sustained over time and how it interacts with the physical and social environment warrants greater attention.

A major issue revealed in the literature, particularly in relation to co-management, is that of representation and diversity. Whilst much of the emphasis has been on how to work with citizens to improve spaces, the profile of these citizens has received insufficient attention. The literature identifies processes that negatively impact on the involvement of marginalised groups and, as this could lead to injustice in terms of provision and use, this is a substantial concern.

Literature themes

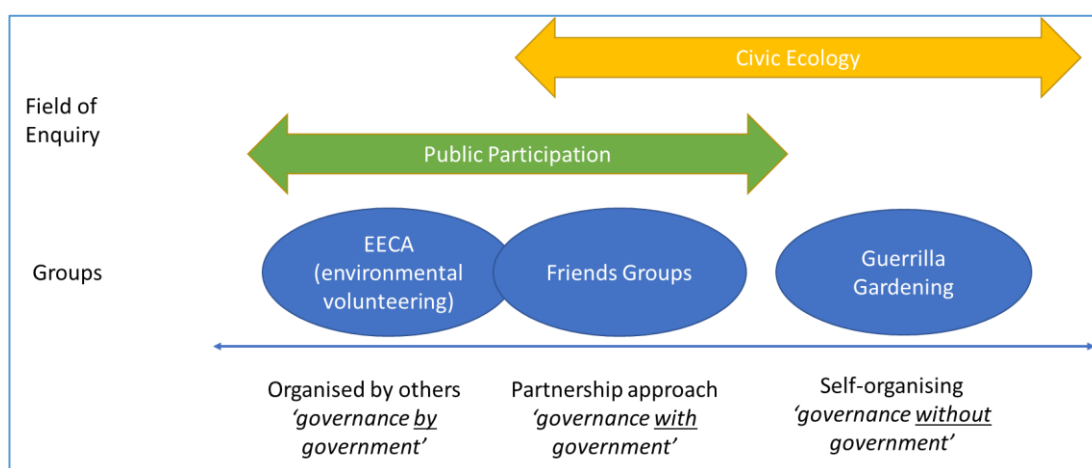
These last two chapters have presented and discussed available evidence on, initially, Friends Groups specifically, before broadening out to other relating concepts, all concerned with 'people doing good things in green places.' Here, how these concepts interlink will be discussed, before moving on to identify gaps in evidence that this study aims to address.

How different ways of participating interlink

A myriad of different, yet overlapping, ways in which the public can contribute positively to urban green spaces emerges from this review. These vary in terms of phase, activity types, aims, ethos, organisation and their relationship with authorities. Coming, as they do from different traditions (landscape, health or civic society) there are also differences in perspective and focus. Learnings however help illuminate how the public can affect urban green spaces.

Figure 3.2, developed for this study, illustrates how these different types of participation and fields of enquiry, ‘fit’ together. The horizontal axis denotes a spectrum of governance: at the left-hand end participation is ‘top down’, organised by others, at the right-hand end participation is ‘bottom-up’, governed by the citizens themselves. EECA, where citizens deliver defined tasks and activities is positioned on the left, guerrilla gardening, where they operate without permission is on the right. Friends Groups occupy a central position, as the literature portrays them as working in partnership with authorities, co-managing spaces. Civic ecology incorporates the centre / right-hand ground, as it involves citizens taking control of spaces, whilst also accepting the critical role of authorities. Public participation sits more towards the centre / left as its focus is on how management can involve citizens.

Figure 3.2: Green spaces volunteering literature: how different approaches and fields of enquiry interlink (Woodward, 2023)



Knowledge regarding the scale of these various activities is lacking. In the case of Friends Groups, whilst many clearly exist, with thousands of people taking part, accurate numbers, characteristics and locations are not available. How the different approaches interact with each other is also underexplored. Whether individuals tend to participate in one way, or many, is not known. Similarly, whether and how groups interact with each other is seldom studied.

Motivations for participating are explored by most of the fields of enquiry. The prevailing tendency is to examine individual reasons, with some consistency across the literature. It tends to include factors associated with a desire to improve the area / environment, as well as factors that improve their own lives (health, wellbeing, sociability). There are suggestions that the former often initiates participation, whilst the latter sustains it. More

in-depth, and emotive, reasons for participating are provided by some of the literature. Jones et al. (2002b) describes how 'passion' (for the place) drives involvement, whilst Krasny and Tidball (2015) identify biophilia (love of life / nature), topophilia (love of place) and memories of how a place used to be as key factors. Guerrilla gardening advocates emphasise an innate desire to green (similar to biophilia) but also introduce a more political aspect, with land ownership injustice driving involvement (Reynolds, 2008).

A minority of the literature regarding motivations, examines how aspects beyond that of the individual affect participation. 'Meaningful community', Krasny and Tidball (2015) say, increases environmental stewardship practices and, as this relationship is two-way, a virtuous circle is created. Aspects of the physical and social environment have also been found to interact with the individual to 'drive' participation (Fors et al., 2019), though this field of enquiry is at a nascent level. Motivation to participate therefore appears to come from individual, community and physical environment aspects, each affecting the other.

Underexplored areas relating to motivation include the variation between individuals. There is limited exploration regarding differences between individuals, and how / where they operate. In the civic ecology literature, many stories of individual stewards going 'against the grain' by taking green action in broken places are featured, and how this kick-starts community efforts is described, but there is little explanation of what leads to one person taking action, whilst others do not. In addition, the process of becoming involved, i.e. how that happens is rarely explained, especially in areas where there may be limited 'meaningful community' and low levels of bio and topophilia, which is often the case in 'broken places' (Krasny and Tidball, 2015).

The evidence base for the benefits of 'seeing green' is well-established (see Chapter 1), but the additional benefits of participation, or 'doing green' is still being developed. The emphasis varies; the environmental volunteering literature focuses on individual benefits, the landscape and management literature on the benefits to the green space and those that manage it, whilst civic ecology and guerrilla gardening concepts highlight community or neighbourhood benefits. When ascertaining the benefits of participation, it is important to consider all these aspects, including both direct and indirect benefits of participating.

There is some consistency in terms of the mechanisms identified as leading to individual benefits (e.g. being able to contribute, being part of something and to leave a legacy) summarised in Husk et al.'s conceptual model (2016) but evidence 'proving' these connections is still emerging.

The potential negative impact of public participation on the people involved, is relatively underexplored. There are some suggestions that, in certain circumstances, volunteering can lead to a sense of futility or despair (Husk et al., 2016) and that participation can be a 'heavy burden' for citizens, especially when this involves working with 'fixed regime' authorities (Aalbers and Sehested, 2018). Friends Groups often have significant responsibilities, including interacting with authorities, and these are not accounted for in Husk et al. (2016) 's EECA conceptual model.

A cross cutting theme is that a positive working relationship between citizens and authorities is necessary for public participation to yield its many potential benefits. The one exception is guerrilla gardening that actively avoids working with authorities (Reynolds, 2008). The reality of these types of organisations working together however is challenging, with many barriers identified, some practical, some cultural. These issues are long-standing, discussed by Jones et al. from 2002. Yet, there tends to be few practical recommendations regarding how to achieve better working relationships.

Visions for positive working relationships vary. Jones (2002a) describes how Friends Groups can be managed to take on greater responsibilities, though also recognising park staff need to change to become more collaborative. Others propose more radical change. The idea of 'stretch and transform' whereby authorities move away from fixed regimes and working in silos to listening more to citizens and embracing their ideas is proposed by Aalbers and Sehested (2018). It is too great a burden, they say, to ask citizens to conform to local authority requirements. In civic ecology, it is suggested that the role of authorities is to identify and support groups and encourage the practice to expand and spread, each practice specific to its own place. Rather than working in a hierarchical way, they propose polycentric governance with many different types of organisations and partnerships supporting each other. Larger organisations' role, they say, is to protect the sources of resilience and not stifle small innovative organisations. Both these more radical ideas appear to be largely theoretical with a lack of tangible evidence base. Overall, there is a lack of real insight as to how authorities and citizens can move to a position whereby they work together effectively, in a way that benefits both themselves and the green space.

One concern raised in the Friends Group literature is that of a lack of sustainability. Learnings can be gained from Mattijssen et al., (2017) whose (relatively small-scale) study identified three key factors for long-term success. One of these was 'adaptive capacity', whereby groups are able to adapt to external changes. This links to the civic ecology literature that argues consistency should not be the aim, as circumstances inevitably

fluctuate leading to change, instead being resilient and adaptable is. Resilience they say, is gained by groups having supportive networks, diverse people involved and polycentric governance (i.e. connections to many different types of organisation / people.) The role of authorities is to nurture this, so the system as a whole is resilient. Examining the life-course of groups may help add to this evidence base.

The final theme identified is that of inequality. What emerges from the literature is that co-management participation approaches often do not focus on inclusion (Fors et al., 2021). This fits with the Friends Group literature that only occasionally mentions deprivation or inequality. Using an environmental justice lens (Rigolon, 2016), this could lead to inequitable provision and use of green spaces. The civic ecology literature focuses strongly on 'broken places' with many examples of disadvantaged communities taking control of green spaces. But this field of enquiry also acknowledges that a lack of community and poverty makes taking action more challenging. A clear gap in the literature therefore is what may enable, or prevent, Friends Groups operating in more deprived areas.

Evidence gaps that this study addresses

This study provides detailed insight into Friends, exploring their particular motivations, how they got involved and the impact on them, both positive and negative. In particular, it explores what personal characteristics helped enable them to be successful group leaders. There is currently little research exploring this particular aspect (see Chapter 2, 'friend characteristics').

A life-course approach was utilised – for established groups this involved reflecting back, for developing groups this was conducted longitudinally in 'real-time' – enabling different phases of the groups, and how they reacted to various challenges, to be explored in depth. Only relatively dated studies (Jones, 2002a; Jones 2002b; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005) have utilised a similar longitudinal approach.

This study also sought detailed insight into the relationship between local authorities and Friends Groups, a major issue of concern raised in the literature. Key areas explored include the impact on groups of these often-difficult relationships, and what enabled a positive relationship to develop. There is limited evidence on either of these topics (see Chapter 2).

The issue of inequality – in terms of how disadvantage affects Friends Groups / participation, and therefore how that affects provision of green space – is a key gap in the evidence (see Chapter 2 ‘summary of evidence’ and Fors et al., 2021). This is at the heart of this study, providing the lens by which the Friends Group phenomena is explored. Focusing on groups in deprived areas allows for in-depth exploration of the challenges faced and how they might be able to flourish despite these. Including local authorities in the study adds their perspective to this topic.

Chapter 4: Conceptual Understandings

This chapter presents the concepts that influenced this study, briefly describing them and explaining how they affected the research. The emphasis is on how the understanding gained from these ideas influenced the design and interpretations. A number of different, albeit overlapping, concepts, as opposed to one overall framework, were selected. These are presented in the following sections: linking control and health, control, power and empowerment, participation, asset-based approaches and volunteering theories.

Linking control and health

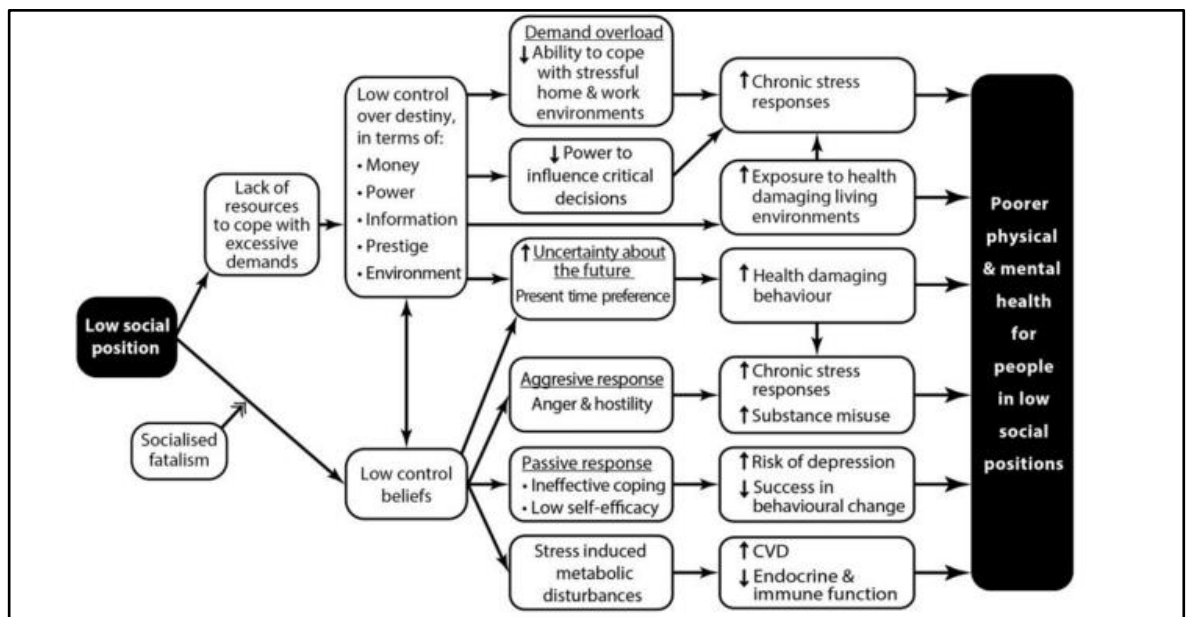
This study is located within wider understandings of health inequalities (see Chapter 1). Having control over one's life (or 'destiny') is a key health determinant, crucial for wellbeing and longevity (Marmot, 2010). This applies at both an individual and community level, the latter involving having control of the place one lives in (Whitehead et al., 2016). Control, however, is unevenly distributed, following a social gradient, with those living in disadvantaged areas having less, and those in affluent areas more (Wallerstein, 2002; Marmot, 2010). This difference is therefore a key contributor to health inequalities. Whitehead et al. (2016) synthesised the theories and pathways that connect control (or lack of it i.e., powerlessness) in the living environment to health inequalities, explaining how something intangible and abstract manifests as ill-health. Their work presents three explanatory (though overlapping) levels of control: personal, community and societal.

This idea is integral to this study, as Friends Groups are trying to take control over their own living environment. Understanding the mechanisms by which deprivation can impact on the capability of communities to exert control over their environment is key. The first two explanatory levels (personal and community) are most relevant as Friends Groups are both neighbourhood-based and dependent on individuals.

'Personal' level theories (see Figure 4.1) start with the premise that those living in deprived areas have a low social position (Whitehead et al., 2016). One 'pathway', linking this to poorer health, relates to actual control. Lacking the ability to affect one's living environment leads to demand overload, a lack of power to influence decisions and exposure to health damaging environments. To make future-orientated decisions, a person needs excess resources (connections, money, information, prestige, power). Those in a higher social position use these to avoid risk and protect themselves – thus gaining a health advantage. In contrast, being 'in deficit' leads to future uncertainty and focusing on the present day. The second pathway involves low control beliefs or 'fatalism'.

Lacking belief in one's control over circumstances can lead to anger and hostility, or low self-efficacy, anxiety and depression. These lead to chronic stress, health damaging behaviours and exposure to damaging environments and therefore poorer health. The two pathways affect and reinforce each other – if you think your voice is not important, you are unlikely to speak up, and your opinion will not be included in decisions.

Figure 4.1: Theoretical pathways at the micro/personal level leading from low control to socio-economic inequalities in health (Taken from Whitehead et al., 2016, p54)

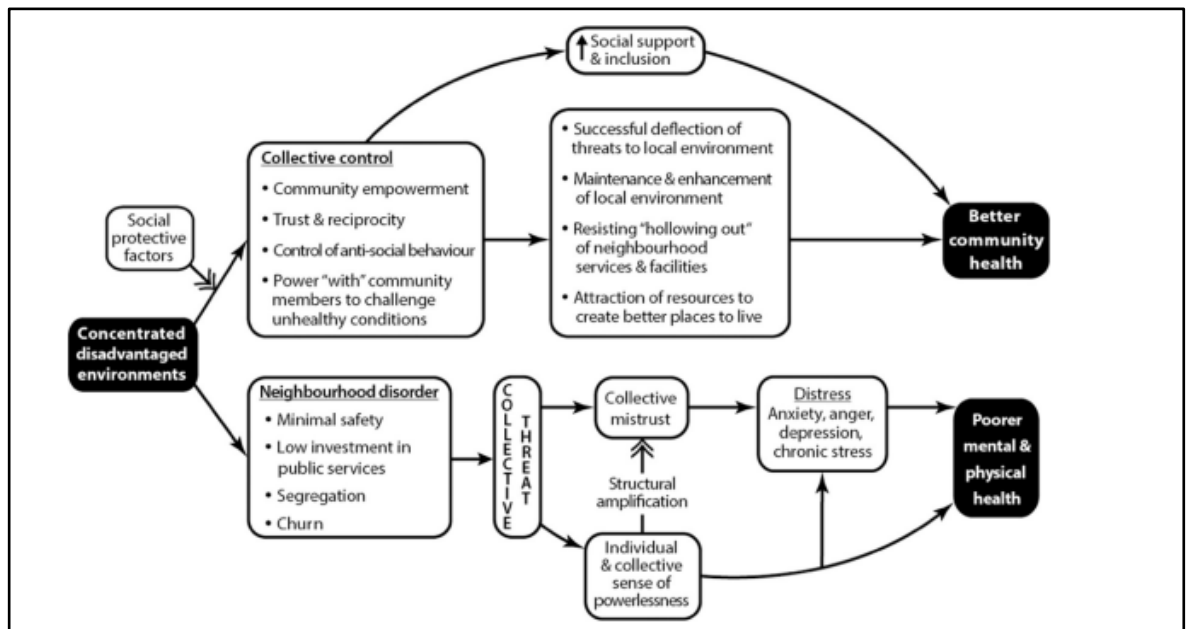


Running a Friends Group is about enhancing health-protective assets, integral to this is being future-oriented. Areas lacking individuals with excess resources potentially lack the capacity to plan, take control and protect those assets. It also explains how other individuals could negatively affect spaces if they are exhibiting an aggressive response (Chapter 7 'the place domain'). Attaining local support could also be challenging if the wider community exhibits a passive response, such as low self-efficacy (Chapter 7 'community involvement').

'Community' level theories are synthesised by Whitehead et al. (2016). See Figure 4.2. The lower negative pathway shows how environments where both the place and people are disadvantaged, can lead to neighbourhood disorder, a sense of collective threat, mistrust and powerlessness. This can be seen in 'left-behind' neighbourhoods: they start to feel unsafe, residents feel alienated and powerless leading to a high turnover of people. Such neighbourhoods are likely to be more challenging environments for Friends Groups

to thrive in – the physical environment feels unsafe and uncared for, and the lack of cohesion negatively affects the likelihood of being able to act together.

Figure 4.2: Meso/community pathways from low control to socio-economic inequalities in health (Taken from Whitehead et al., 2016, p56)



The upper, positive pathway, in contrast, shows how increased collective control can lead to better community health. By embracing social protective factors, and acting together for mutual benefit, communities can become empowered, increasing trust and reciprocity and controlling negative behaviour. This, the theories suggest, leads to actions to improve the local environment and increased resources. Social support and inclusion also increase, improving community health.

A successful Friends Group fits this positive pathway, as a 'social protective factor'. By acting together to improve their local environment, this has a direct effect (better green space) and an indirect one (increased social support and inclusion), both of which improve health. This study explores the role of Friends Groups in helping disadvantaged neighbourhoods resist the negative pathway of disorder and mistrust and pursue instead a pathway of collective control. It is thus vital to understand how the pathways operate, including potential intermediary steps.

One critique of these theories is that communities may realistically be limited in how much they can change the environment (Friedli, 2013). If their efforts are unsuccessful, they realise the limits of their influence, and this could lead to burn-out and disillusionment, ultimately therefore increasing feelings of powerlessness.

These theories, synthesised by Whitehead et al. (2016), reveal the additional challenges Friends Groups operating in deprived areas could face, when attempting to have more control over green spaces. This relates both to people's personal resources and their control beliefs, as well as community level issues relating to collective disorder and mistrust. A positive pathway of community empowerment however is identified.

Control, power and empowerment

Community empowerment is the *“process by which people are able to gain more control (power) over decisions and resources that influence their lives and health”* (Laverack, 2019, p2). How the powerless gain power and control is critical to health promotion (Green et al., 2015). For community empowerment to truly happen, power structures and how they are manifested at a community level, need to be understood and addressed (Wallerstein, 2002; Popay et al., 2021).

The relationship between Friends Groups and local authorities is affected by the power dynamics between them, including each organisation's level of power, its source and their beliefs about power. It is therefore vital to understand this aspect of their relationship. In this section the various types of power that exist and how they interact with each other are described, drawing in part on a summary by Popay et al., (2021).

'Power over,' is a direct form of power, commonly associated with authority figures, that involves one party making another do what they want. It is viewed as limiting and 'zero-sum' in that, if one party gains power, the other loses it. Six bases of 'power over' are identified by Laverack (2019): coercive (negative consequences for non-compliance), reward (positive consequences for compliance), expert (possessing superior knowledge/ability), informational (possessing information), legitimate (acceptance of status) and referent (identifying / accepting relative positions). Popay et al. (2021) identified four sources: compulsory (laws and rules), institutional (bound to organisations), structural (e.g., gender / race / class) and productive (having the means to produce). This relates to hegemony, whereby dominant groups control others via economic, institutional, and ideological means (Green et al., 2015; Laverack, 2019).

In this study, many of the sources of 'power-over' rest with parks teams. They can reward (e.g., provide resources), they possess technical expertise and information and, as they are employed professionals, they have institutional or legitimate power. Many are also not necessarily representative of the communities they serve, giving them structural 'power

over.’ If parks teams perceive power as ‘zero-sum’, they would see the gaining of power by Friends Groups as a threat, as it would reduce theirs (see Chapter 8, ‘control’).

The other three types of power are ‘emancipatory’ (Popay et al., 2021). These are generative, non-dominating and non-finite, meaning that parties can work together to mutually increase their power - one does not take it away from the other. ‘Power within’ relates to capabilities, ‘power with’ involves working with others who have shared goals, whilst ‘power to’ involves taking action. These interact, for example, achieving something positive (power to) or working with others (power with) can improve confidence (power within).

Influence is a soft form of power, involving being able to change others’ actions without threat. Similar to referent power, it involves people (or ‘followers’) valuing the person’s values, skills and attributes and wanting to associate with them. Stardom and charisma are important sources of influence for those lacking legitimate authority or power (Green et al., 2015). “*Extraordinary*” people with ‘charisma’ can inspire others, act as role models and be seen as worthy leaders, thus giving them the power they might otherwise lack (Green et al., 2015, p35). Role models who share characteristics with others (homophily) are especially powerful, hence the importance of ‘near-peers’ as community leaders.

Community groups often lack ‘power over’ and therefore rely on emancipatory sources of power and influence to create change. How Friends Groups utilise these types of power can be seen in the results (Chapter 6 ‘lobbying and campaigning’, Chapter 7 ‘authority, status and confidence’).

Community empowerment involves working to increase emancipatory forms of power (Wallerstein, 2002; Laverack, 2019; Popay et al., 2021). For Friends Groups, this could mean, for example, training and skills development (to improve capabilities ‘power within’), linking to other similar groups or technical experts e.g., forums (to improve ‘power with’) and conducting actions (to improve ‘power to’). These are termed ‘horizontal community building dimensions’ (Wallerstein, 2002) or having an ‘inward gaze’ (Popay et al., 2021). Civic ecology (Chapter 3) recommends many of these approaches to strengthen environmental stewardship groups in ‘broken places.’

Equally essential however are ‘vertical community-organising efforts’ (Wallerstein, 2002) or possessing an ‘outward gaze’ (Popay et al., 2021). This involves the community challenging the structural conditions affecting them, including combatting or resisting authorities ‘power over’ them. Laverack’s (2019) community empowerment continuum is relevant here. Step one is personal action, step two small groups, step three community-

based organisations, step four partnerships and step five social and political action. Communities gain power via action, experience, connections and gaining scale as they move up this continuum. The fifth step is the ultimate goal as, only by challenging existing systems, will disadvantaged communities become truly empowered.

These theories are closely linked to public health / health promotion disciplines. Indeed a key aim of public health practitioners is to empower communities (Laverack, 2019).

Friends Groups however operate within the sphere of green space management, and the desired outcomes for the professionals involved are different; parks teams are ultimately aiming to achieve better green spaces. In one field therefore empowerment is the means, in the other it is the end goal.

Contemporary community empowerment programmes have been criticised (Friedli, 2013; Popay et al., 2021) for being too 'inward' focused and not challenging inequitable structural conditions, something that was fundamental to the original vision of empowerment. Communities, they say, are encouraged to take on responsibilities previously delivered by the state, as 'empowerment,' without understanding, or being able to challenge these inequalities. They are expected to use the same capabilities as affluent communities but have insufficient resources to do this. If they fail, they may be blamed or internalise this, increasing their sense of powerlessness, thus potentially exacerbating, rather than reducing inequality. To counteract this concern, Popay et al. (2021) proposes two frameworks. The emancipatory power framework helps communities identify their levels and sources of power, so they can strengthen them, and the limiting power framework identifies how 'power over' is operated and potential forms of resistance. Productive power, for example, which often stigmatizes poor communities, can be counteracted by positive narratives.

The concept of power therefore helps understand the environment in which Friends Groups operate. It explains the sources of power that Friends Group can potentially access and how these can be strengthened, plus potential threats to empowerment. Recent critiques highlight the need to be vigilant to ensure community empowerment is not being used to pass responsibility on, without accompanying increases in power (Friedli, 2013; Popay et al., 2021). This study actively explores the issue of whether Friends Groups are a way of empowering communities or an abdication of state responsibilities.

Participation

Participation consists of the public being more involved in making the decisions that affect their lives. It involves citizens taking more control, shifting power from authorities to the public and is therefore linked to, arguably preceding, the concept of collective control and power described earlier. Arnstein's 'ladder of participation,' from her 1969 paper, is still much-used, though other typologies have been developed since (Arnstein, 1969). These are compared and critiqued by Cornwall (2008) whose conceptual paper informs this section.

Arnstein's ladder consists of eight rungs, each indicating the extent of citizen power in determining a plan or programme. The bottom rungs represent non-participation, the middle tokenism (where citizens have a voice but are not necessarily heard) and the top is where citizens have genuine power and control. Arnstein talks about the 'have-nots' and the 'power-holders' saying participation is about "*nobodies trying to become somebodies with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations and needs*" (1969, p217). Whilst this is acknowledged to be a simplification, the idea of a gradation of influence remains pertinent. The middle rungs show how participation, without power re-distribution, is an 'empty ritual', with the power-holders claiming to have involved citizens, but in reality, maintaining the status quo. Examples of this include citizens being involved in decision making bodies but not provided with adequate advice or knowledge and therefore not able to fully participate, or where those invited are 'chosen' by the power-holders as more likely to be compliant and are therefore not representative. Higher up the ladder, participation is structured so citizens have genuine influence. Getting to this point tends to involve citizens demanding or 'wrestling' power away from the powerful, as it is rarely given freely (Arnstein, 1969).

White's typology focuses on what participation is used for, as perceived by the agency and the citizens (Cornwall, 2008). This highlights that parties may have differing reasons for engaging with the process and this can lead to tensions. In this study, local authorities may see it as a way of increasing efficiency (instrumental participation) whilst Friends Groups may see it as way of influencing the authority (representative) or becoming empowered (transformative).

These typologies show that participation is a broad term and, whilst it can be done in ways that genuinely empowers, it can also be used disingenuously, to placate or manipulate. 'Power-holders', in this study the local authorities, can be reluctant to share power and can feign citizen participation but in reality, maintain the status quo via, for example,

providing inadequate support or ineffective structures. To move 'up the ladder,' citizens (Friends Groups in this study) need to be assertive and knowledgeable. Different reasons for participating could lead to mismatches in expectations between parties, leading to frustration.

Cornwall stresses that "*clarity through specificity*" is necessary (2008, p281). How well participation works in practice depends on the context, the people involved and the purpose. Without clarifying these, she says, there is a danger that it can become about communities 'doing-it-themselves,' leading to resistance or cynicism. Open spaces for dialogue are needed, alongside supportive processes to ensure take-up and build capacity. Spaces created by citizens themselves are important for disenfranchised groups as the power imbalance is less than in 'invited spaces' (set up by agencies). Ensuring legitimate representation is also key as, if only a narrow range of atypical citizens participate, it can entrench privilege. This requires understanding social networks so the views of those who 'self-exclude' (maybe lacking confidence or time) are not missed. Above all, she stresses, it takes time, effort and persistence, from both sides, to ensure involvement does lead to influence. There needs to be political will to implement the requested changes, and commitment from communities to work together. Being clear therefore about what people are being asked to do, why and who is involved is critical in ensuring participation leads to genuine empowerment.

These ideas are helpful for this study. It shows that Friends Groups and parks teams need to agree what their purpose is and invest time and effort in developing their relationship. Ensuring sufficient support for groups to effectively participate is also vital. Considering who is included, and who is not, is important for legitimacy – this could include characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability or interest. Finally, considering how spaces are created and dialogue occurs is key to addressing power differentials. Meetings instigated by parks teams and held in their offices, for example, may intimidate, whereas parks teams visiting a community space is less likely to.

Much of this literature pays attention to decision making, possibly because of its origins in planning (Arnstein, 1969) and there is less emphasis on broader engagement, including taking practical action. The next two sections (asset-based approaches and volunteering) therefore focus on this.

Asset-based approaches

Focusing on what makes people healthy and well, as opposed to what makes them ill, is at the heart of asset-based approaches (Foot and Hopkins, 2010; Hopkins and Rippon, 2015). This concept involves identifying the assets that exist in a community and then promoting and strengthening these to maintain and sustain health and wellbeing, therefore reducing inequality. Assets can be tangible (e.g., green spaces) or intangible (e.g., groups, cohesion, skills and knowledge) and are similar to the 'Social Protective Factors' in the Whitehead et al. (2016) collective control model.

These approaches developed partly as a reaction to deprived communities being portrayed as 'have-nots' and 'powerless' in some community empowerment literature (see earlier). This was seen as patronising and disrespectful to communities (LGA, 2020). Asset-based approaches emphasise community strengths, appreciating their wisdom and abilities, in contrast to traditional 'deficit-based' models that focus on problems and therefore what services need to be delivered (McLean et al., 2017). The phrase 'head, heart, hands' is used to indicate that people have knowledge, passion and skills to contribute (Hopkins and Ripon, 2015).

Asset-based approaches emphasise community action. Once assets have been recognised, they are then mobilised, by linking the intangible (e.g., community knowledge) to the tangible (e.g., a physical asset) (Hopkins and Rippon, 2015). The practitioner's role is to nurture, facilitate and broker; they help community members recognise their assets, support them in building capacity and encourage participation and connectedness. Rather than delivering, they help facilitate actions and encourage collaborations, as ways of improving health and wellbeing. Co-production, where professionals and citizens work together, as equals, is the ultimate aim.

Arguments for this approach are that it builds social networks and connections that are health promoting. Communities gain from the completed actions, from participating and becoming empowered. It is argued that it is more sustainable than other models, "*morally good*" (Harrison et al., 2019, p6) as people are central to the solutions and a practical response to reduced resources (PHE, 2015).

Asset-based approaches fit closely with Friends Groups. The groups are an intangible asset, consisting of individuals with skills and knowledge, connecting together to take action that will improve a tangible asset. Whilst conducting this study I was also evaluating an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) initiative that involved 'Community Builders' facilitating neighbourhood actions (South et al., 2021). This affected how I

viewed this study, as it provided a comparison in terms of language, interactions and attitudes, giving a useful alternative perspective.

For asset-based approaches to work, there needs to be a shift in organisational culture, away from the status quo of governance, accountability and risk-aversion, towards trusting communities, giving them more control and working in a relational way (Hopkins and Ripon, 2015). A recent report (LGA, 2020) stressed this requires bold leadership and workforce development. The example of Wigan, who have transformed how their services are delivered, is given. They 'let go' of power and gave "*good people the time and space to do great things*". This required energy, motivation, strong leadership, changes to recruitment and re-training existing staff. This sort of transformation is not easy - whilst many commissioners are 'asset-aware,' they still use a top-down consultative approach, as opposed to genuine co-production. Asset-based approaches also require a place-based perspective, where services complement community assets. This is not yet happening at scale, services still tend to work in silos, in 'delivery' mode, without a neighbourhood lens (LGA, 2020).

This demonstrates that if local authorities wish to work in an asset-based way with Friends Groups, they need to change how they, especially the parks teams, operate. This would require committed leadership, mindset change, workforce and structure alterations, plus a shift in power and control. Their current attitude towards Friends Groups and how they work with them is discussed in Chapter 8.

Criticisms of asset-based approaches exist. One perceived "*fatal weakness*," also described in the power section, is that they add to the burden on deprived communities and are used to justify the retreat of statutory services, as part of the neo-liberal agenda (Friedli, 2013, p140). This is because deprived communities have insufficient capital, especially economic, to allow them the time and energy to engage and invest in developing social capital, and the approach does not address these structural imbalances. Proponents agree that realising the assets of individuals requires a strong economic foundation to support engagement and that power dynamics need to be reflected on and challenged. However, they stress that these approaches were never intended to replace services, but to complement them, and to challenge the helplessness narrative (LGA, 2020).

This debate is very pertinent. If asset-based approaches are used to justify reductions in necessary services, and disadvantaged communities are not able to fill this gap, this presents a very real danger to green space assets in deprived communities. If, however,

Friends Groups can complement green space services, co-producing with authorities, the opposite could occur. Developing an understanding of what is happening in reality, as this study does, is therefore key.

Volunteering theories

Many various volunteering theories and concepts exist. In this section, aspects relevant to this study are described, drawing from two eminent reviews (Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012). Volunteering is included because, whilst it fits within the broad spectrum of participation (discussed earlier), the emphasis is more action-orientated, in keeping with Friends Groups.

Volunteering can be defined as

“freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organisations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance” (Snyder and Omoto, 2008, p3).

Friends Groups largely fit this definition, especially in relation to the emphasis on action, longevity, remuneration and being cause related. They do not however operate through formal organisations, being self-managed and organised. Wilson (2012) says this type of volunteering still fits under the broad umbrella of volunteering but notes that research tends to centre on formal, organised activities and often overlooks more informal, spontaneous activities (e.g. litter-picking). This means the input of lower social classes and ethnic minorities, who tend towards this style of volunteering, has been underplayed.

Many academic disciplines have examined volunteering, exploring different aspects of the phenomena via varying lens.

Psychology focuses on individual traits. Personality traits including agreeableness, extroversion, empathic concern, social value orientation and self-esteem are associated with increased volunteering (Hustinx et al., 2010). ‘Personal identity’, the desire to express a sense of self, also helps explain volunteering (Wilson, 2012). Five volunteer identities are described; ‘the influencer’ who fights injustice / wants a better place, ‘the helper’ who is compassionate and understanding, ‘faith-based’ who responds to a calling, ‘community’ who values loyalty and solidarity, and success, associated with being trusted and a good leader /citizen. Reasons for taking up volunteering tend to be associated with value-

related motivations, but personal benefits are important for continuing (Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012).

Sociology sees volunteering as a social phenomenon, positioned between the state and personal social ties. It is about solidarity, caring for others, community spirit and belonging (Hustinx et al., 2010). Social ties help explain volunteering – they lead to people hearing about opportunities, meeting other volunteers and, if they feel others share their impulses, they are more likely to get involved, especially if the task requires commitment and collective effort (Wilson, 2012). Neighbourhoods also influence volunteering. If people feel a bond with their neighbours and feel good about where they live (plus if they are homeowners and long-term residents), they are more likely to volunteer.

Socio-demographic characteristics are important. The ‘dominant status’ model suggests people with a higher socio-economic status tend to volunteer more and have more prestigious roles. Southby et al. (2019) assert that volunteering is “*socially determined*,” affected by access to human, social, cultural and economic capital (p916). This is important to explore as, if this is true of Friends Groups, it affects how representative their opinions are. In addition, given the positive impact of volunteering on health, achieving “*wider participation amongst socially-disadvantaged groups*” is important for tackling health inequalities (Jenkinson et al., 2013, p8).

What people gain from volunteering, given its lack of remuneration, is examined by economists (Hustinx et al., 2010). ‘Private’ benefits include those relating to personal investment (training / skills to improve human capital) whilst ‘consumption’ models emphasise emotional benefits such as joy or the ‘warm glow’ from contributing. The ‘public good’ model is that individuals are donating their time altruistically to improve public services for all. ‘Impure altruism’ is the idea that people volunteer for a combination of public and private benefits.

Political scientists view volunteering as an important aspect of civic society and democracy. Being part of a voluntary organisation can teach people to collectively organise and assert their rights. Volunteers can act as a buffer between communities and governments. How it is interpreted depends on political persuasion. Conservatives may see volunteer labour as “*an escape route*” to reduce government size, whilst liberals may see it as complementing government action and giving citizens a voice (Hustinx et al., 2010, p420).

All these perspectives shine a light on the many influencing factors affecting people’s involvement in Friends Groups. Their personal traits, perceived identities, characteristics,

the benefits they might gain, the neighbourhood they live in and broader society, all potentially have a role. Understanding this affected what I asked and how I interpreted their involvement. As much of the evidence addresses initial motivations, I probed what factors sustained involvement over time. As will be seen in the results, all of these aspects emerged during the study, overlapping and interlinking with each other.

How volunteering relates to activism is debated (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Hustinx et al., 2010). Volunteering is often perceived as targeting individuals, providing services and maintaining structures and, as such, there is *“a tendency to de-politicise volunteer work, emphasising its virtuous and compassionate nature”* (Hustinx et al., 2010, p413). Activism, in contrast, targets structures, fights for justice and seeks to change social conditions. Musick and Wilson (2008) argue that the line between the two is often blurred, with many volunteering activities including advocacy. They see activism as a *“sub-type of volunteering”* that uses *“collective action to achieve a collective good”* (p23). ‘Political’ scientists see volunteering as a *“breeding ground for leadership and organisational skills”* (Hustinx et al., 2010, p420) allowing small groups to challenge government. Volunteering can therefore be an active challenging role, with agency, or a passive accepting one associated with task fulfilment. Where Friends Groups sit on this continuum was explored in this study, both in terms of their roles and responsibilities, their relationships with local government and the leaders’ personal characteristics.

Experiences of volunteering are less well researched and understood (Wilson, 2012). The relationship between volunteers and paid staff is important but can be conflicting. Staff depend on volunteers but can become irritated if they feel their expertise is insufficiently valued. Studying the ‘dynamics’ of volunteering, particularly the likelihood of quitting or continuing identifies some important factors. Being empowered, having support (from staff and other volunteers), feeling recognised and appreciated, good training and adequate supervision all lead to increased satisfaction within the volunteer role, and this leads to commitment and continuance. Having a good ‘fit’ between tasks and motivations is also key (Wilson, 2012). Some of these e.g. appreciation and recognition feel relevant to Friends Groups. Overall, however, these findings demonstrate that the environment in which they are operating – including the support they have access to, how the role is organised and the personal benefits they gain, could impact on their longevity in the role.

The consequences of volunteering are well studied, with a strong evidence base that, depending on the person and the context, it can improve mental health and well-being (Wilson, 2012; Jenkinson et al., 2013). Mechanisms leading to this include feeling more

empowered, boosting self-esteem, feelings of 'mastery' and making friends. Negative outcomes are also possible, especially if the burden is excessive (Jenkinson et al., 2013) or if over empathising leads to emotional suffering (Wilson, 2012).

Critiques of volunteering do exist. Biases in who volunteers could lead to power structures being reinforced, whilst some see volunteering as being 'placating,' encouraging people to look away from larger issues, plus there is a tendency to focus on positive outcomes for individuals and ignore the more negative aspects (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Hustinx et al., 2010). Volunteering is also criticised for encouraging the retraction of the state (Popay et al., 2021). All these criticisms were considered in relation to Friends Groups. A particular focus of the study, for example, was on potential negative consequences for the individuals involved, as well as the type of person who led the groups.

Summary

This chapter has presented concepts relating to control, power and participation and how they can influence health. It has discussed how asset-based approaches and volunteering theory can be used to understand the Friends Group movement. Central to all these ideas is that having control, power or influence over one's life and space are integral to health. And, as disadvantaged communities lack these, they experience worst health than more advantaged neighbourhoods (i.e. inequality). Community empowerment, so people have increased 'mastery' over their lives, therefore needs to occur.

Differences emerge in terms of how optimistic or pessimistic the approaches are. Some focus more on the negatives, emphasising the relative powerlessness of disadvantaged communities and the un-willingness of authorities to cede power. Others are more positive, stressing the strengths that communities and individuals have, and believing that co-production with authorities is possible. Related to this is how much emphasis is placed on 'inward' focused community-building initiatives that strengthen their own power, compared to 'outward' focused initiatives that challenge authorities' power over them. However, all the theories and concepts presented in this chapter acknowledge that both approaches are important. What is critical is understanding that structural inequalities exist, acknowledging this and making efforts to rectify this. These efforts need to come from both 'sides' – authorities need to support communities and be prepared to 'cede' power to them, whilst communities need to act collectively to seize more power.

The who, how and why of community empowerment programmes matter greatly. Which people are involved, in what way (structures, representation and relationships) and why,

whether it is to improve efficiency or people's lives, all affect whether they are truly empowering or about entrenching existing inequality. Friends Groups, at their simplest, are about local people getting together to improve their local green space. They are about taking collective control, using local assets and being able to influence the decisions affecting it. The concepts presented here demonstrate that this could be an empowering act, leading to better community health, or it could be about passing the risk from the state to local people. What makes the difference relates to why Friends Groups have been set up, who is involved and how they interact with the community and authorities. This lies at the heart of the study, influencing its inception, its design and the interpretation of the results.

Chapter 5: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed account of how the study was conducted, in order to address the research aims and objectives fully, rigorously and ethically. It starts by explaining what approach was undertaken and why, before describing the overall project design. It then moves on to cover sampling and recruitment, data collection, ethical considerations and analysis. Each section describes the initial plan before reflecting on how this progressed in reality. The chapter ends by considering the role of the researcher in the study via a process of active-reflexivity.

Methodological approach

This study used qualitative methodology, with ethnography influences. Qualitative methodology is appropriate when seeking to answer exploratory and contextual research questions (Bowling, 2014; Ritchie and Ormston, 2014; Seale, 2017) and these are at the heart of this study. This type of research is recommended when the topic being studied is not well understood and the phenomenon is complex and deeply rooted in the experiences of people and the context in which they live (Mason, 2018). Rather than seeking 'an answer,' it aims to achieve in-depth understanding and explanation of multi-faceted perspectives. All of this fits with this study, that aims to develop an understanding of Friends Groups, who are little studied and context specific, and explore how communities become mobilised and sustain their activity.

Qualitative research is rooted in 'interpretivism,' emerging from social science traditions (Ormston et al., 2014). It is centred on the belief that no one objective 'truth' exists, with laws to be uncovered (as positivism does), instead what is important is developing a detailed understanding of the phenomena being explored that appreciates participants' various realities as they perceive them. This involves recognising the complexity of their unique circumstances, experiences, perspectives and histories (Ritchie and Ormston, 2014; Mason, 2018). This is appropriate to this study that recognised individuals' perspectives vary depending on their life histories, experiences, values and beliefs – and those of the community they live in. It will also be affected by the structural determinants affecting their lives, such as their gender, social class and neighbourhood. Rich detailed descriptions were therefore necessary, with deeper insight coming from comparing and synthesising.

Epistemology, or one's way of knowing the social world, affects methodology choice and data interpretation (Carter and Little, 2007). This involves the relationship between the

researcher and participant. In this study, participants were perceived as 'active collaborators', who, together with the researcher, attempted to understand the phenomena being studied. This involved a freer way of interacting than positivist traditions would endorse, with participants invited to discuss emerging ideas. Truth was perceived as consensual, rather than being absolute. Appreciating my role in the research, and its interpretation, via active reflexivity was also vital – see later in this chapter. A final aspect affecting this research was the emerging desire to utilise the findings to influence existing systems, in line with critical theories of epistemology (Moon and Blackman, 2014). Gaining knowledge and understanding whilst important, was felt to be insufficient, instead using this knowledge to help overcome power differentials in society was favoured. A series of recommendations for local authorities was therefore developed (Chapter 10).

Ethnography influenced phase 2 of this study (developing groups). Originating in anthropology and sociology, this type of research involves immersing oneself, for a period of time, in the community being studied as an 'invited guest' to observe events as they occur (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). This, ethnographers argue, enables a real understanding of people, and their culture, as they exist at that time to be gained. Observing people's behaviour and their beliefs, in their own natural setting, as opposed to relying on their account of events, is fundamental to this (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) and is especially valuable when the behaviour being studied is contextual, subconscious or instinctive. This was highly appropriate for this study as seeing groups undertaking activities in the green space they maintain, and viewing their interactions with it, each other and the community, was a critical way of reaching understanding.

Conducting ethnographic research involves intimate face to face contact with participants to build trust and develop a rapport. By being present so often, participants get used to the researcher and therefore act more 'normally' i.e. as they would without the researcher there, thus increasing the findings' authenticity (Seale, 2017). This requires the researcher to take on 'dual roles' as both a participant and a researcher – and maintaining this can be difficult, especially when the community seeks their advice. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) advocate reciprocity, believing that respecting participants, and assisting when necessary, is more important than maintaining perceived 'neutrality'. How this issue manifested in reality is discussed in the 'developing groups' section.

Both qualitative research, and ethnography as a tradition within this, are developmental or inductive, in that they allow ideas and concepts to emerge from the data collection phase. The researcher will be aware of relevant theories but seeks to maintain an open mind

during the research process (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Ormston et al., 2014). The longer time frames associated with ethnography means that the research can be interactive and recursive, with the researcher returning to topics and re-thinking, alongside participants. In this study, key themes were discussed with developing group participants multiple times and, whilst I had read many theories prior to data collection, I did not introduce these to participants, unless they raised related points. Another aspect of qualitative research is that just describing and observing phenomena is not deemed sufficient. Developing an explanation, with generalisability beyond the specifics of the phenomenon being studied, is critical (Porter, 2002; Mason, 2018). In this study therefore, whilst individual narrative accounts were produced, patterns between these were explored to identify key success factors (Chapters 7 & 8).

The types of methods used in qualitative research include naturally occurring data (e.g. observation, documentary / discourse analysis) and generated data, via participants recounting their experiences in interviews and / or focus groups (Bowling, 2014). Ethnographic research emphasises the importance of the former especially participant observation (for the reasons discussed earlier) but also advocates using multiple data sources to 'shed light' on the phenomena being researched. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) list twelve applicable methods. Observation, where events are recorded as they occur and the data is collected as fieldnotes, recordings, photos, maps etc. is one, whilst interviews to probe selected topics, including personal histories, knowledge and beliefs are another. Other methods include content analysis of secondary / archival data, focus groups to gain information about norms and behaviours and elicitation where participants respond to stimuli. In this study, multiple sources of data were used, especially in Phase 2 (developing groups), and to some extent in Phase 1 (established groups). See 'data collection with Friends Groups' later in this chapter.

Both qualitative and ethnographic research stress the importance of being naturalistic and flexible in one's approach. Ethnography in particular emphasises that key to successful fieldwork is adapting to suit the situation, including using changing circumstances to explore how this affects the phenomena (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). This proved critical in this study where circumstances changed unexpectedly at times (see later) necessitating data collection to be adapted accordingly.

The researcher role is integral to qualitative research. An interpretivist viewpoint posits that the researcher is an integral part of data collection, with their background, values and vantage points affecting their understanding and interpretations (Ormston et al., 2014;

Mason, 2018). Whilst they can aim to be as objective and neutral as possible, this can never be fully achieved. A researcher's personal identity also affects participants' behaviour and responses, as does the power dynamic between them and the community being studied, referred to as 'positionality' (Porter, 2002; LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Given this, practitioners emphasise the importance of reflexivity. Mason (2018) stresses that to produce trustworthy research it is vital to be a "*thinking, reflective practitioner*" who self-scrutinises, to understand and consider their role in the process. This includes how a researcher's values may have affected the decisions and interpretations made, and how their presence may have influenced the phenomena being studied. Communicating these decisions and making any assumptions explicit is critical for trustworthiness (Cooper, 2016). See 'reflexivity' later in this chapter.

Maximising authenticity is necessary for ensuring research findings are considered seriously, especially by policy makers (Ormston et al., 2014). Triangulation is an important part of this. This involves utilising multiple sources of data, involving a variety of perspectives, to deepen understanding and provide a fuller, more '3D' picture of the phenomenon. This can add credibility to the research and corroborate interpretations. This study therefore sought to uncover multiple sources of data within case studies and it involved the perspective of local authorities alongside that of Friends Groups. This proved vital to gaining a fuller understanding of the phenomena, as demonstrated in Chapter 8.

Mason (2018) says that qualitative research must be carried out systematically, strategically (whilst still being flexible), ethically – and it must provide "*social explanations to individual puzzles*". The rest of this chapter describes how this study was designed and executed to achieve these ambitions.

Research project design

The project was designed to link the research objectives to data collection logically and systematically (Yin and Campbell, 2018). Capturing a diversity of perspectives, in terms of group types, individual roles and local authorities, to ensure triangulation, and therefore greater trustworthiness was key. The design involved three data collection phases, two with Friends Groups and one with local authority park teams, each varying in terms of perspective, methods, and the depth and richness of data collected.

A multiple case study design was utilised in phases 1 & 2. Case studies are recommended when a contemporary phenomenon is being explored in-depth within its

real-world context (Yin and Campbell, 2018), as this study aims to do. Multiple case studies provide more compelling evidence than single ones, as subsequent cases can reinforce or expand on the results. In this study, the groups were the 'cases' or phenomena of interest (Mason, 2018).

Phase 1 was a multiple case study design with 'established' Friends Groups. These groups had some similarities to each other: all had existed for at least two years and had some success (having improved or developed the green space), thus enabling success factors and issues to be identified. Data collection was relatively in-depth, involving participant observation and interviews with leaders and group discussions (see later for more detail) to reflect on the group's history. Interactions were planned to be relatively short-term, lasting two or three days.

Phase 2 consisted of multiple case studies with 'developing' Friends Groups. These were at their early stages of development, were smaller scale and had had limited success. The intention was to spend time with a small number of groups to observe the process of mobilisation in 'real-time'. Gathering in-depth insight by participating in activities, observing meetings and interviewing key group members was the aim (see later for more detail). As such, it was more influenced by ethnography than phase 1 (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). As this phase developed, the importance of partners (outside organisations supporting the Friends Groups) became evident, therefore the scope widened to include their perspective. Interactions were longer-term, the plan being to spend approximately eight days with each, over 18 months.

Data collection for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 took place almost entirely at the green spaces they were associated with and was therefore contextual in nature.

Phase 3 consisted of interviews with local authority parks and green space managers. The purpose was to explore their perceptions of Friends Groups and how they worked with them, thus aiding triangulation. The data collection was more formal, consisting of qualitative semi-structured interviews (single or paired) at their offices or cafes.

The decision to phase the data collection by participant type was so preliminary findings from earlier phases could influence the next. Success factors identified in phase 1, for example, could be explored in phase 2. This was utilised in phase 3 where parks teams were asked for their perspective on the issues raised by Friends Groups in previous phases. How this was handled ethically is discussed later in 'ethical considerations and processes'.

Table 5.1: Phases of research project

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Focus of enquiry	Established Friends Groups	Developing Friends Groups	Local authority park and green space managers
Timings	Between May 2018 and February 2019 (seven months)	Between June 2018 and May 2021 (nearly three years)	September to November 2021 (three months)
Interaction with participants	Short-term (2-3 days in one time period), in-depth, contextual	Long-term (8 days over 18 months), in-depth, contextual	Single interaction (semi-structured interview)
Perspective	Historical – reflecting back	Longitudinal – observing in ‘real-time’	Historical and current
Participants	Friends Group leaders and members	Friends Group leaders, members, local residents, partners	Parks and green space managers

This research study aimed to explore in-depth the Friends Group phenomena, to deepen understanding around their role and how they operate and thus develop generalisable explanations. The importance of context, varying perspectives and the relative complexity of it led to an approach based on qualitative and ethnographic principles. The study was designed in three phases, two using multiple case-studies, to illuminate the topic being explored and provide a ‘full picture’ with varying perspectives.

Sampling and recruitment

This section presents information relating to the sampling and recruitment of Friends Group participants in phases 1 and 2.

Sampling

The initial sampling unit was at group level as this was the unit of interest i.e. the ‘case’ (Yin and Campbell, 2018). The aim was to conduct enough case studies for similarities and differences between them to emerge, thus allowing patterns to be explored, whilst also ensuring there was sufficient time with each group to build relationships and develop in-depth understandings (Yin and Campbell, 2018). The initial proposal was to include seven Friends Group case studies in total, four ‘established’ and three ‘developing’, in the anticipation that this would allow for a suitable breadth and depth of data to answer the research objectives.

A purposive sampling approach, where cases are chosen with particular characteristics so the topic of interest can be explored, was utilised (Patton, 2002). Five selection criteria were set, two relating to the local area and three to the groups themselves. See Table 5.2.

The first criterion related to neighbourhood deprivation. Every participating group was to be operating in a park or green space in an area of high deprivation. This was because central to this research is the exploration of how deprivation affects the development of Friends Groups and, from this, consider the implications on health inequalities (PHE, 2020). Including groups from more affluent areas would not aid this exploration, as their experiences, capabilities and resources are likely to be very different to those in deprived areas (Whitehead et al., 2016).

In common with much inequality literature (Marmot, 2010), high deprivation was defined as being in the top 20% of deprived neighbourhoods, as measured by the IMD. This combines information from seven domains to produce one score, with each area in England ranked from 1 (most deprived) to 32,844 (least deprived) (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015¹). As all domains could affect people's capacity to volunteer and how Friends Groups operate, the IMD was considered appropriate.

The IMD score is provided at Lower Layer Super Output Area level (LSOA), each comprising approximately 1,500 people (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). This is an appropriately sized area for this study as it equates to neighbourhoods, with the relevant green space likely to be local to residents. To be included in the study, the green space had to be in an area with an IMD ranking of 6568 or higher (i.e. top 20%). To ascertain ranking, the government website

¹ This is now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The IMD data, look-up tool and website remain consistent despite the change in department

<https://opendatacommunities.org/home> was utilised. This includes a 'look up' tool that provides deprivation data by LSOA. The data used for this study was published in 2015, emanating from the 2011 census, when the research was being planned this was the most recent available.

The second criterion related to the ethnic diversity of the neighbourhood. The aim was to ensure there was variation between cases in terms of how diverse the neighbourhoods were. Initial scoping had identified that there could be variation in terms of how different ethnicities interact with green spaces and, if all the neighbourhoods were too homogenous, this may not emerge. As data collection progressed diversity was considered (partly from the researcher's local knowledge), and, in line with multiple case study best practice (Yin and Campbell, 2018), recruitment adjusted accordingly. Ethnicity data is provided by the ONS, from census data. This was only available at Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) level and therefore this data was utilised.

Having at least three members was another criterion for all included groups. This was because the aim was to explore how groups operated as a whole, as opposed to individual activists. Three was chosen as the minimum number, so groups just starting out were not excluded. The term 'member' was interpreted flexibly as membership procedures, especially with smaller Friends Groups, are often informal (HLF, 2016). Therefore, as long as the group had at least three people who regularly participated, ideally in the running of the group, they were considered to have met this criterion.

Two other criteria, designed to ensure there was variation between groups in their membership, were included. One related to gender, with the aim being to include at least one mixed gender group, one largely female and one largely male group within the final sample. The other related to ethnic diversity, with the aim being to include at least one group with a high proportion of ethnic minority members.

Consideration was given to the groups' location. I live in Yorkshire and there were practical advantages to groups being reasonably close to my home, especially for developing groups who would be visited many times. Within relatively easy reach there are many urban deprived neighbourhoods that fit the criteria however, having at least one group from outside Northern England, to provide an additional viewpoint was also seen as beneficial. Plus, as the role of park teams was being explored, making sure there was a range of local authority areas involved was important.

Groups did not have to be formally constituted or to have received funding to take part. This was so more informal groups were not excluded.

Table 5.2 summarises the inclusion criteria. It was anticipated that these would ensure a diversity of group types were included, to aid understanding. The final sample composition, its attributes, and how these relate to the criteria, is in Chapter 6.

Table 5.2: Sampling criteria for Friends Groups

Criteria	Local area		Groups			Location
	Deprivation	Ethnicity (% of local population from ethnic minorities)	Gender (group members)	Ethnicity (group members)	Size (number of members)	
Sample	All groups in area of high deprivation (top 20% IMD).	Groups to be in areas with a range of % of the population from ethnic minority groups.	At least one mixed gender group, one male dominated, one female dominated	At least one group with high proportion of ethnic minority members	All groups to have at least three group members	Range of local authority areas. At least one not from the North.

Recruitment

How Friends Groups were recruited to participate is now presented. See Table 5.3. One issue impacting recruitment is that no list of UK Friends Groups is publicly accessible. And, whilst many groups utilise social media, the information provided on these platforms is limited, often not including their location, for example, meaning neighbourhood deprivation cannot be ascertained. Many groups suggested by individuals or local authorities were in affluent areas, therefore not fitting the criteria.

The approach taken therefore was based around networking, either with individual contacts associated with parks or green spaces, or Friends Group forums in nearby cities. To enable this an ‘explainer’ was developed that outlined the study aims, detailed what type of groups were needed, and gave information about the researcher and supervision team. See Appendix 5.1. This was used to accompany personal contact.

Table 5.3 shows how groups were initially identified and then contacted. Most established groups were identified via contacts made whilst developing the research proposal. These included a major park funder, two Friends Group forums and a work colleague. I either directly contacted them, or the contact did this for me. One forum emailed all groups with the study details, one emailed back and subsequently agreed to participate. The other forum was chaired by the local authority who said that very few of the 45 groups in the city were in deprived areas, and those that were, tended to be run by people living outside the

area. They therefore suggested a suitable group, who I contacted. As the study progressed, it became evident that most groups were not ethnically diverse and therefore this criterion was not being met. A colleague, who was an (inactive) member of a group in an ethnically diverse urban area, therefore offered to contact them, leading to successful recruitment. One group was recruited directly, as I had met the leaders at a conference on urban green space and health.

The two developing groups were recruited more indirectly, akin to a snowballing technique (Sixsmith et al., 2003). During phase 1, I met the Chair of a newly forming group and she agreed to participate in phase 2, on the proviso that she did not have to take part in formal face-to-face interviews. She was happy for me to 'follow' the group over time by taking part in activities and have informal conversations and be interviewed via email. This was discussed with my supervisory team and agreed.

The second developing group was reached via the Yorkshire Conservation Charity² (YCC). Their member's magazine had featured an article about a project aiming to connect people in deprived areas with urban nature, by encouraging active citizenship. I met the project lead who suggested a particular site where there were early signs of residents forming a group to maintain a local green space. Whilst not meeting the criterion of having three group members, it was felt important to include, as it was a unique opportunity to observe a new group forming in real time. We attended events together, making connections with local residents, who agreed to participate in the research. This is discussed more in the results section.

² This is a pseudonym

Table 5.3: Successful recruitment methods for phase 1 and 2

	Established Groups (phase 1) <i>(NB group names are pseudonyms)</i>					Developing Groups (phase 2) <i>(NB group names are pseudonyms)</i>	
	Hardy Rec (HR)	Norton Park (NP)	Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF)	Gaskell Park (GP)	River Round (RR)	Wilde Meadows (WM)	Raven Hill (RH)
How I heard about the group	Via a major national funder of parks	Met at a conference on UGS and health	Recommended by city Friends Group forum	Aware of group from social media	Group contacted researcher, following email from city's forum.	Arose whilst meeting with TBCF.	Article re UGS project in Yorkshire Conservation Charity magazine. Project lead suggested group.
How I made contact	Tailored email with explainer	Tailored email with explainer	Tailored email with explainer	Work colleague was a member – emailed for me, using explainer.	Meeting on UGS and health led to an academic putting me in touch with city's forum.	Via a member of TBCF	Accompanied YCC employee

Two groups contacted did not agree to participate. Initial responses to recruitment emails were positive but, when trying to agree arrangements, no replies were received. Reasons for not participating were not given.

To confirm participation, group leaders with whom I had had a conversation with, and who had seemed enthusiastic about participating were provided with written information about the research (Appendix 5.2) and a checklist (Appendix 5.3) as to what taking part involved. This was to ensure they were fully aware of what taking part involved and they had appropriate material to pass onto other members/volunteers.

Sampling criteria was therefore established to ensure the topic being explored could be answered by a variety of participant perspectives. All the case studies were to be in areas of high deprivation and have at least three group members. There was to be a range of groups in terms of the local population's ethnicity and the group member's gender and ethnicity. Successful recruitment was based on developing positive connections with individuals and organisations working in the area and utilising these, alongside documents that increased credibility and made it easy for people to assist. Having sufficient time for the recruitment phase was important as it meant networks could be established, as was being flexible in terms of the communication methods and approach. Having a list of Friends Groups, by location, would have enabled a more systematic approach to sampling, as groups fulfilling the criteria could have been pro-actively targeted.

Data collection with Friends Groups

This section presents the methods used for data collection, first with established and then developing groups. It includes information about the process of collecting data plus how 'tools' were developed. Ethical considerations and processes were carefully considered during this process but, for clarity, are presented later.

Established Groups (Phase 1)

The aim was to collect, for each case study, meaningful and contextual data, in line with ethnographic principles, that answered the research objectives. A naturalistic style was utilised, in keeping with how community / volunteer-led groups tend to operate (Huberman and Miles, 2002). I was aware that participants were not being paid for their role, so

respecting their time and adapting to their schedules and preferences was important. The size and formality of groups, and how leaders operated also varied, so data collection needed to adapt to suit.

Data collection for each established group was planned in stages, as illustrated by the flow-chart in Appendix 5.4. Step 1 was to confirm the group's participation in the study with the leader. Existing contextual information would also be collected to ensure time spent with participants was used efficiently and schedules could be adapted. Step 2 was to meet the group leader, on-site, and conduct an in-depth interview. Due to their integral role this interaction would explore many aspects relating to the group and its work (see later). Step 3 was to take part in an activity alongside other volunteers, having informal conversations, whilst Step 4 was a volunteer focus group. Different participant types would therefore be involved at different times and to varying levels of intensity.

Three data collection tools were developed for use with established groups: a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 5.5), a focus group schedule (Appendix 5.6) and a participant observation checklist (Appendix 5.7). Field-notes of each visit were kept.

Developing the schedules started by clarifying the research objectives, breaking this down into potential topics and then question areas. Related concepts, available literature and scoping interviews influenced these question areas. For example, exploring the types of people who got involved was influenced by dominant status theory (Hustinx et al., 2010), whilst social capital theory led to questions about connections between members and outside organisations (Carpiano et al., 2006). See Appendix 5.8 for how this was sketched out initially. Which participant type could meaningfully answer which questions was also considered.

The structure of the interview / focus group and the phrasing of the questions were carefully considered. This was based on qualitative research theory (Robson, 1993) and personal experience working as a qualitative researcher. Previous schedules that I had developed and used, and how they had worked in reality, therefore helped inform development.

The schedules' structure consisted of an introduction, warm-up, main body of questions plus a 'cool-off' and 'closure' section (Robson, 1993). At the start there were relatively straightforward questions about roles and how they got involved, before moving onto more in-depth topics, for example, their relationship with the local authority. These were grouped together so participants were clear what the focus was at any one time. Towards the end there were questions relating to broader issues, such as green space inequality, and recommendations for other groups. Previous experience has shown that this often yields

new information and participants relish the opportunity to pass on learnings. It also helps them emerge from the more reflective state that they can enter during interviews.

How the questions were phrased was deliberated over. Whilst relatively complex concepts were being explored, the questions needed to sound natural, be understandable and not 'stall' the conversation. Qualitative research practice recommends that they are open-ended, neutral, sensitive and clear whilst not being too long, multiple barreled, containing jargon or leading participants (Robson, 1993). Rather than use the word 'motivation' therefore, the question was phrased as *"Thinking back, why did you decide to get involved?"* and rather than ask about longevity or sustainability, participants were asked *"What keeps the group going?"*.

Efforts were made to ensure questions were not leading. So, for example, rather than asking if there were any issues working with the local authority, this question was phrased as *"How would you describe the group's relationship with the local authority?"* with a probe of *"Have they helped or hindered the group at all?"* At times developing non leading questions, when a particular issue needed exploring, was challenging. One example of this was the potential negative impact of involvement. An initial question on impact was kept open *"Has being part of this group changed you in anyway?"* but the probe then asked more directly *"Has it had any negative effects?"*, as it was felt participants may only focus on positives and this was important to explore. Another challenge was the quantity of topics to cover, with the final interview schedule containing 23 main questions, plus sub-questions. This was longer than originally hoped but cutting down the questions would have excluded key topics. The focus group schedule was shorter as conversations would contain inputs from more people and tend to be more wide-ranging. In addition the involvement of volunteers is more limited, so aspects which they were less likely to have direct experience of, were excluded.

The participant observation checklist developed for use whilst taking part in activities alongside Friends Groups contained both descriptive (e.g. what was occurring / who was involved) and interpretative information (e.g. whether I perceived any barriers to activity) as recommended by LeCompte and Schensul (2010).

Reflective field-notes were kept for each visit and contact. These were kept unstructured to allow free-flowing thoughts to emerge but tended to contain factual information about the visit, photos of the site, my personal impressions of the area, the green space, the participants and my interactions with them. Interpretative ideas, including initial ideas to explore for analysis, were also included. These notes helped remind me about the site during later analysis and to consider the interaction between the Friends Group and the

physical environment. Both the checklist and the reflective field-notes were written up as soon as possible after the visit to ensure maximum accuracy (Robson, 1993).

Table 5.4 gives details of the actual interactions with established groups. It presents how many visits took place, the interaction type and how many people were included in the data collection. All interviews and focus groups were recorded, with consent (see 'ethical considerations'). A discussion on how the interactions progressed follows.

Table 5.4: Interactions with established groups

	Hardy Rec (HR)	Norton Park (NP)	Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF)	Gaskell Park (GP)	River Round (RR)
Number / dates of interaction(s)	One visit, October 2018	One visit, May 2018	Three interactions, June 2018.	Two visits, Jan/Feb 2019	Two interactions, January 2019
Type / place of interaction(s)	Paired interview (in park hub) Walking interview (post formal interview)	Informal focus group (picnic area) Walking interview (pre formal interview)	Informal focus group (community room next to GS) Walking interview (pre focus group) Telephone interview Face-to-face interview (in green space)	Informal focus group (park café) Walking interview (mid focus group) Formal Interview	Participant observation (river-side) Telephone interview
Number of Friends interacted with	Two (leaders)	Four (two leaders plus two committee members)	Four (Chair, Treasurer plus other committee members)	Six (Chair, Vice-Chair, Café volunteer plus other committee members)	Seven (one leader plus other volunteers)

Each green space associated with the Friends Groups was visited at least once. Time spent in the green space was vital, helping me understand the context within which the group was operating, and as a guide to subsequent conversations. It also helped to observe community interactions with the space.

A 'walk and talk,' a method closely associated with asset-based approaches (Garcia et al., 2012; Sharpe et al., 2000), always occurred, where a group member would show me around the green space, pointing out key features, any issues, the work the group had done or wanted to do. Being in the spaces often triggered a topic specific to a particular feature that might not have emerged otherwise. An abandoned play-park, for example, prompted a conversation about advocacy, whilst watching a dog-owner led to a conversation about anti-social behaviour. Participants often seemed to open up more whilst out walking and would sometimes talk about issues not raised during the more formal interactions. As the conversations were guided by our surroundings, they tended to jump from topic to topic, so I had to be adaptable with the questioning. Recording quality was sometimes poor as walking, talking and handling the equipment was difficult, especially during cold weather.

Interviews with the leader(s) happened in every case. They were welcoming and hospitable, keen to show me the space, talk about its history and the improvements they had made. They talked freely and copiously, with the recorded part of the interaction often lasting 1.5 hours and touching on all parts of the planned schedule. Interviews took place in a public area either in or very close to the park or green space – including a park bench, a community room, a café and a community hub.

Being adaptable was important. During two case studies, rather than holding the interviews during the visit, phone interviews took place afterwards. This worked well as positive relationships had already been established and holding the interviews by phone at a pre-arranged time ensured focused, plentiful time for an in-depth and informed discussion. Similarly, on three separate occasions I arrived anticipating meeting one individual but other members came to join in with the conversation. These contributions were very valuable and in keeping with the naturalistic data collection style but did raise some challenges in terms of structuring the interview and ethical processes (see later). In one case, a committee member gave me a data-stick containing historical information about the group. This was unanticipated and did not conform to the ethical approval I had. I therefore submitted an ethics revision and only accepted the information once this had been approved (see later).

Despite offering, I only participated in one activity with an established group. This involved participating in a river clean-up with a group of volunteers from the Friends of River Round. This led to many informal conversations with volunteers and valuable insights. Attempts to arrange separate focus groups with volunteers were not successful. Whilst Friends Group members were keen to be involved whilst a discussion was on-going, arranging a separate time and place for a longer conversation did not prove possible. In my first two visits I

suggested this to the leaders but they did not appear enthusiastic. Their reasons are unknown but, could relate to the time it would take to organise or not wanting to ask volunteers to give more time. As it was important to respect their time and follow their lead in terms of data collection, I did not pursue this again.

In general therefore, as data collection with the established groups progressed, it became apparent that, rather than the planned individual steps, the process was more free-flowing, with the steps overlapping and blurring together. Separate leader interviews and focus groups tended to merge informally. I would have arranged to speak to one person, for example, only for others to turn up. As the approach was aiming to be naturalistic and to respect participants' preferences, I learnt to be flexible and to adapt the planned process to the circumstances. This meant, for example, always having extra information sheets and consent forms and allowing more time than anticipated, in case additional meetings had been arranged. The questions themselves worked well, with participants eager to engage and clearly understanding them, whilst the structure felt logical during the more formal interviews. Often however, I had to adapt the order of the questions to suit the circumstances, for example, asking some questions whilst on the 'walk and talk' and others during the more formal semi-structured interview.

There were less visits per case than originally planned, tending to be one plus follow-ups, as opposed to two or three. This was partly because it did not always feel appropriate to come back - whilst everyone was very welcoming, some mentioned how visitors took up a lot of time, and I did not want to take advantage of their welcome. In addition, by the end of the data collection for each group I felt I had developed a good understanding of what had led to the group being successful, and therefore arranging additional days felt less important than analysing the existing data.

Cold weather affected some of the data collection. Two visits were in January / February and were near freezing. Despite taking extra precautions (warm clothes, flasks etc.), this did affect the outdoor data collection as it was hard, for both myself and the participants, to stay focused. Interviews were therefore moved to a café or held on the telephone afterwards. This was a successful strategy as everyone was more comfortable and relaxed, thus opening up more and giving longer answers to questions.

To summarise, phase 1 managed to collect in-depth data from all established groups. The planning and development of tools helped clarify my thinking, how to phrase questions and increased rigour in terms of how the information was collected. However, the actual interactions had to appear 'natural' to participants and be respectful of their preferences –

and therefore often required adapting to the circumstances of each visit. Being able to 'think on my feet' and adapt to circumstances in this way whilst interacting with people required being a confident and skilled researcher. It also required understanding what each interaction was aiming to achieve, as it was not possible to just follow the schedule.

Spending time in the spaces with participants was critical to the success of this phase. This reduced the formality of the interaction and led to participants opening up about their experiences. It also gave them an opportunity to show an outsider what they had achieved and this felt as if it was a positive experience for them. It was disappointing that the focus groups with volunteers did not occur but, as the data collection progressed, it became clear that this more formal type of interaction did not always suit participants.

Developing Groups (Phase 2)

This section covers phase 2 data collection, with developing groups, explaining what practices were kept the same as phase 1, and which were adapted.

The plan for this phase was to spend time with newly emerging groups over 18 months. This longitudinal, immersive approach (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) would, it was hoped, enable their efforts, their experiences and any issues to be viewed in real-time, as opposed to reflecting back on historical events. It was anticipated that this would involve the researcher forming a close relationship with key members, as per ethnographic principles, as they would be spending considerable time together.

At the beginning of the process I met with group leaders and explained the research aims and what taking part involved, using a tailored information sheet (see ethics). If they agreed to participate, I planned to take an iterative approach to data collection, 'following their lead' by taking part in activities and observing at events they invited me to (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). I anticipated interviewing the leaders at regular intervals and conducting 'mini' interviews with other volunteers or participants at events.

An interview schedule was developed for the group leaders using similar principles and processes as phase 1. One difference was that the schedules were separated into three sections, with initial, follow-up and final questions (see Appendix 5.9), as multiple interactions were anticipated. Initial questions focused on the neighbourhood and their connection to it, the group aims, their activities and future hopes. Follow-up questions, for subsequent interactions, included asking about any developments since the previous

interview. The final set of questions included more reflective aspects such as perceived success factors and broader topics such as inequality.

As this phase progressed it became clear that ‘partner’ organisations played an important role. In both groups, employees of a conservation organisation were involved in supporting or instigating their activities. Interviews were therefore planned with these people, with a separate schedule developed. See Appendix 5.10. Some questions related directly to their experiences of working with the particular group, whilst others asked more broadly about the role of communities in improving green space.

Table 5.5 summarises the actual interactions with developing groups. For more detail see Appendices 5.11 and 5.12.

Table 5.5: Interactions with developing groups

	Friends of Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Period of interactions	June 2018 to December 2020 (2.5 years). Most interactions in 2018 (x5) and 2019 (x7). Only one in 2020.	June 2018 to May 2021 (nearly 3 years). Most interactions in 2018 (x3), and 2019 (x5). No interactions in 2020, two in 2021.
Number of visits / interactions	Thirteen. Nine on-site, four via email or telephone.	Eight on site visits Plus two other interactions – one by phone, another to a different site.
Participant Observations	Three. A pond clear-out, plug-planting activity and litter-pick / bulb plant.	Six. A community clean-up, wreath making, family activity day, a fungi foray, a volunteering task day plus herb bed maintenance.
‘Walk, talk, cuppa’	Five with Friends Group leader (two with one other committee member too)	Met YCC project lead at local supermarket twice for chat / cuppa. Tour of site on most visits with YCC / local families.
Interviews with residents / Friends	Friends Group leader – three interviews. One by email, one face-to-face, one by phone.	Face-to-face interview with local resident / potential leader of Friends Group
Partner Interviews / Interactions	YCC project lead - formal interview plus other informal conversations at activities.	YCC project lead - formal interview plus informal conversations during events. YCC assistant – informal conversations.
Other connected organisations	Met local community arts group with Friends Group leader	Informal conversations with housing association and youth group, during PO.
Other people interacted with informally	During PO activities, conversations with; local councillors, green-space maintenance staff and rangers, green-	During PO activities conversations with; local families, vicar, other volunteers.

	space volunteers, other participants in activities (local families / residents).	
Other interactions	Emails from leader re issues	Took part in film for YCC

Groups participated for between 2.5 and 3 years, approximately a year longer than anticipated. Most interactions occurred during 2018 and 2019 when visits took place every few months. During 2020 fieldwork was halted due to the coronavirus pandemic as the university suspended in-person research and organisations stopped delivering most activities. School closures also affected my capacity to conduct field-work. In late 2020/early 2021, once fieldwork was possible, follow-up interviews with key individuals were conducted.

Each site was visited multiple (8 or 9) times, with other interactions also occurring. This intense form of data collection meant I developed a good understanding of the neighbourhood, the green space, how they interacted with each other, plus any changes over time. It also meant I was able to develop a relaxed and trusting relationship with key participants where they shared their experiences and their feelings with me (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). One leader would email regularly to 'vent' about issues, invite me to events and to meet other organisations. Initially she had only wished to interact informally but, during a particularly critical time, she consented to participate in a recorded interview. The potential leader of the other group, a local resident, also agreed to be interviewed after we had spent time together clearing up the green-space. My belief is that both these participants would not have agreed to be interviewed if we had not spent so much time together. They were both wary of authority and lacked confidence in expressing their opinions.

Most interactions were informal, either involving participant observations or 'walk and talks' (Sharpe et al., 2000). The former involved taking part in activities such as community 'clean-ups', planting events or family type activities. People present included local councillors, the police, housing associations, green space managers and employees, as well as local residents and volunteers. I always participated fully in the activities, because I wanted to contribute to the community and thank them for their involvement, but it also helped develop good relationships with them, as evidenced by being introduced by a local resident as being okay to talk to, as I always "*got stuck in*"! This is discussed more in the ethics section but I always made it clear visually and verbally that I was a university researcher, there to observe.

One of the aims of the participant observations was to have informal conversations with people present. This did happen, with people often coming to speak to me about the green

space, the importance of it for them, and other related issues. To ensure openness, I would always remind them of my role as a researcher, but this did not halt the conversations. If the conversation became in-depth, I would invite them to take part in a more formal interview but generally people would carry on talking informally, occasionally about quite detailed or potentially sensitive topics. Following discussions with my supervisors, it was agreed that top-line themes from these interactions could be included in field-notes as topics to explore or consider later on, but any individual or specific details, particularly sensitive ones, were not included in written notes.

'Walk and talks' were the main way I interacted with the leader of Friends of Wilde Meadows. She liked to show me around the space, pointing out its positive attributes and any issues. These walks contributed to developing a positive personal relationship with the participant and we had many interesting, in-depth conversations about the space, nature and the community whilst walking.

More formal interviews with partners (x2), a group lead (x1) and a local resident (x1) also took place. These enabled more focused in-depth conversations to occur regarding their involvement. Whilst questions were based on the schedule, the topics explored were tailored to the space and the group, focusing on any issues or activities observed during my time with them.

Other organisations that I had conversations with included a local arts group who were planning events in the green space plus a housing association and a youth group who delivered activities in them. These interactions were captured in field-notes. I invited the latter two organisations to a formal interview but, due to staff changes, these did not occur.

This informal, iterative approach to data collection had many advantages – some of which are detailed above, namely the ability to develop trusted relationships and an in-depth understanding of the space. Additional advantages relate to its longitudinal aspect. Being present as circumstances evolved, meant people's reactions were captured at the time, instead of being recounted later. Rather than being a considered response, their immediate reactions were often emotive and 'raw', including feeling frustrated, angry, hopeful or excited. The excitement of a group leader when lots of people turned up for a litter pick was tangible, as was her anger when a hedge was 'flayed'. And, when fly-tipping returned after a big community clean-up, I could feel their disappointment. Had they been reflecting back on these experiences at a later date, as interviews and qualitative research often do, their reactions would have been more considered, potentially more muted or affected by subsequent experiences.

Similarly, by being more personally involved, I got to experience the space in a way that was more akin (though not the same as I was only visiting) to how a local person might. For example, when spending time at Raven Hill I often felt uncomfortable and 'on-edge' due to the slightly hostile, 'lawless' atmosphere (see Chapter 7 'place'). This helped me empathise with the challenges local residents face and their desire for safety. Experiencing the positive aspects of the spaces also helped me develop a deeper understanding of how precious the spaces are for local people.

One challenge associated with this approach to data collection relates to my position as a researcher. This is discussed more later in 'reflexivity' but, in brief, having developed a friendly relationship with participants it was hard at times to remain neutral and retain professional boundaries, as much 'positivist' training can emphasise. One participant, for example, would ask for advice or reassurance about how she was running the group. Remaining 'detached' or 'neutral' felt inappropriate and uncaring, given the amount of time we had spent together, but I also did not wish to affect too much how the group was run. This is a common dilemma in ethnographic research (Porter, 2002; LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) and reading more broadly about this type of research and having discussions with my supervisors helped reassure me that this was appropriate. They encouraged me to think of myself not as an 'objective' gatherer of data, but as an 'instrument,' with the important aspect being to reflect on your position in the process and understand your own personal perspective (see reflexivity section later).

One other issue is that there is the danger of 'favouritism'. I found it more challenging to build a relationship with one of the leaders, partly because of differences in values, than with the other, where there was a natural ease. I was uncomfortable about this but also felt it was important to recognise those feelings. Spending time with the person concerned and truly listening to her experiences and the life challenges she faced, helped me override some of these feelings, as I came to understand her more. I also tried to recognise my prejudices more, so I could better understand my reaction.

Phase 2 data collection was therefore more ethnographic than phase 1. The cited benefits of this i.e. being able to develop a more in-depth understanding of the community and its context and not relying on recounted experiences, did emerge. The longitudinal aspect was especially valuable (Yin and Campbell, 2018). Some of the common challenges associated with ethnography came to fruition, such as the issue of blurred boundaries between the researcher and the participant, plus it took a considerable amount of time to operate in this way. The fact it relied on following participants' leads was initially challenging, as it felt

outside of my control. Over time I learnt to become more comfortable with this, to acknowledge that it was their decision whether to invite me to an event or not, and I had to accept that. All I could do was strive to develop a positive relationship with them, offer my assistance if appropriate and listen to their stories when they were ready.

Local authorities

Phase 3 aimed to ascertain the views of park or green space managers ('parks teams') on the benefits and challenges of working with Friends Groups. By the time this phase was being planned in detail, many challenges in terms of their relationship had emerged. This highlighted the importance of gaining their perspective but also meant it could be a sensitive topic to explore. I was concerned parks teams either may not agree to speak to me or, if they did, they might be defensive. The data collection was therefore planned especially carefully, in discussion with my supervisors and a university colleague who had experience of working with local authorities.

Sampling criteria

The ideal participant was identified as the person who actually managed parks or green spaces (in deprived areas) and was responsible for liaising with Friends Groups. It was important that they were the person working 'on the ground' as they were the ones that are "*caught between a rock and a hard place*" (*personal fieldnotes*). In contrast, those responsible for writing the strategies etc. would be less able to illuminate these issues as clearly.

Ideally, selected local authorities would include those where participating Friends Groups were located, in order for perspectives to be compared. One concern, discussed later in the ethics section, is this needed to be done in a way that did not inadvertently compromise the anonymity of the groups. APSE (see below) suggested also including a local authority who had changed how they worked in relation to Friends Groups for additional insight.

Recruitment process

APSE was key to recruitment. This networking organisation have contact with 300 UK local authorities, delivering training and seminars, plus conducting and disseminating practice-based research. A university colleague introduced me to the APSE staff member responsible

for park management who, after a series of emails and phone calls, offered to assist with recruitment and invited me to a regional meeting to meet park managers.

At the meeting, attended by 40 park managers, I was formally introduced and attendees were encouraged to participate in the study. I developed a flyer (see Appendix 5.13) that I distributed during informal conversations. This approach was successful, leading to three local authorities participating in the research – see Table 5.6. The meeting attendees tended not to be the appropriate person, but they put me in contact with those who were. I followed these up via email and successful responses were received fairly rapidly afterwards. There was one exception to this route. The Utterley parks team had not attended the meeting, and as a Friends Group from their had participated in phase 1, I was keen for them to participate. I therefore contacted them directly, using a contact provided by the city's forum.

Recruitment therefore was more straightforward than initially anticipated, largely due to APSE's involvement. Their support meant I did not have to approach local authority park teams 'cold' and their endorsement gave credibility to the research. This recruitment route also meant that it was less associated with particular Friends Groups thus reducing the chance of inadvertently breaking anonymity.

Table 5.6: Recruitment methods for local authority parks teams

	Wheaton	Utterley	Malbry	Radstowe
How initial contact made	APSE conference	Friends forum	Met at APSE conference (introduced by APSE manager)	APSE conference
How participant was identified	Attending individual identified potential participant and provided contact name.	Chair of forum suggested potential participant and provided contact name.	Included individuals at APSE conference plus they suggested another.	Attending individual put me in touch with head of parks team, who suggested the participant.

Planned process

Semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face at their place of work, were the chosen data collection method. This, it was felt, was the best method for allowing in-depth exploration of the various topics. This was more formal than phases 1 and 2 but, as the interviews were about their professional role, this felt appropriate. It was also unlikely that

they would feel intimidated or lack confidence when interacting with a researcher, as members of the public might.

Development of tools

An interview schedule was developed (Appendix 5.14). Whilst developing this I had a couple of concerns. One was that the parks teams might be defensive and not engage with the issues concerned - this has sometimes been the case in the past when I have interviewed professionals. Whilst I wanted to ask them clearly about the issues raised by Friends Groups, I did not want to be overly confrontational or endanger anonymity. Conversations with my supervisory team helped, they encouraged me to ask directly about difficult issues, as it was important to give them the opportunity to respond.

To develop the interview schedule, any findings relating to local authorities from phases 1 and 2 were identified. These, alongside informal conversations with colleagues and APSE, helped form a topic list to explore (see Appendix 5.15). These were then phrased into questions, grouped into topics and ordered in a way that would lead them naturally through the conversation.

To put participants at ease, I emphasised that I was there to listen and not to criticise. To understand their situation, the first questions were about their personal background in parks, their roles and responsibilities and the pressures they faced. They were then asked about their experiences, positive and negative, working with Friends Groups. The schedule then asked directly about issues raised by groups. To preserve anonymity it was made clear that these came from groups as a whole and were not from groups in their area, as follows;

“When I’ve spoken to Friends Groups from up and down the country, they’ve raised a few issues about working with local authorities. Can I ask you what you think of these, as someone who works for a local authority?”

They were then asked about a particular issue e.g. bureaucracy. The schedule ended positively asking for recommendations going forward.

Interactions

The interviews, in most cases, worked very well. Questions about their own backgrounds opened up participants, as they reflected on their initial motivations for working in parks, and helped shift my perspective from the Friends Groups to the local authorities. Giving them the

opportunity to talk about the pressures they were under also helped. Most talked openly about the challenges they faced, both generally and when working with Friends Groups, and at times I was surprised how open they were about their feelings. Some were very reflective about their role, wanting to engage in discussion, whilst others had more fixed opinions. The least successful interview was with a participant who was relatively new in post and therefore tended to talk theoretically, rather than about actual experiences.

Phase 3 of the research therefore managed to successfully recruit parks teams, via the assistance of a gatekeeper. The method chosen, semi-structured interviews, allowed for a serious and in-depth examination of the topic and was therefore in-keeping with the aims. This phase of the research was smaller scale than the earlier phases, but it provided a different perspective on the phenomena being explored and was vital to understanding the whole picture (see Chapter 8).

Ethical considerations and processes

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout this study, starting from how it was designed, how data collection was planned, and then how it was conducted. It was important to the researcher that the study had a positive impact on the communities and participants involved, as well as furthering knowledge for future practical benefits.

Leeds Beckett University Research Ethics Policy 2017/18 was consulted (Leeds Beckett University, 2018) along with additional guidance from the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA), chosen due to the ethnographic methodology (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth, 2011). Their general principles state that researchers should carefully consider the effects of the study on individuals and communities, seeking to protect them, respect their wellbeing and honour their trust. Ethical practice should anticipate potential problems to minimise harm and anticipate repercussions. It should also leave the research field in a state that allows future access. More specific points are covered below.

Throughout the study, I always aimed to uphold these principles and, when I had concerns, I reflected on them in my fieldnotes and, if appropriate, discussed them with my supervisory team. One potential problem I was cognizant of, was not affecting the relationship the group may have with authorities, given that they were often reliant on them for support. I therefore took great care to keep the group's identities anonymous (Webster et al. 2014). I also

wanted to be careful to not raise groups expectations in terms of what the research might be able to achieve. I aimed to do this by honest, clear communication early on in the process and throughout.

Key considerations

Attaining informed and voluntary consent from potential participants is a key tenant of ethical practice. In this study this applied particularly to interview participants (participant observation is discussed later).

To ensure participants were fully informed, easy to read information sheets were developed. These contained a study overview, what taking part would involve, how the information would be used, anonymity, their right to withdraw plus contact details. See Appendix 5.16 for the 'developing group' version. Three other versions were produced, for established groups, partners and local authority participants, the main difference relating to what taking part involved.

These were distributed as early as possible in the interaction. They were emailed in advance, either in relation to someone's own participation or with a request that they pass it on to other potential participants, if appropriate (see earlier recruitment section and Appendices 5.2 and 5.3). Individuals considering participating were all given a hard copy of the information sheet, directly by the researcher, with time to read it and the opportunity to ask questions.

Those willing to participate, were asked to sign a written consent form. For the telephone interviews this was done via email. See Appendix 5.17 for the developing group version (other versions were produced for other participant types). In ethnographic research, where the interaction is long-term, consent needs to be continual, and not a 'one-off' (ASA, 2011). Participants in phase 2 were therefore asked to consent every six months, or when a formal interview took place.

One challenge was that sometimes additional participants (in Friends Groups) would join the discussion unexpectedly. When this happened, I would pause the interview to give them an information sheet and to make sure they knew what was taking place. This did affect the flow of the interactions but was important ethically.

During participant observations it is important that every effort is made to ensure that the researcher's presence is clear and visible (ASA, 2011). I therefore asked the leader to let other people know beforehand (verbally and via a poster / email template – see Appendix

5.18) that I would be there. On the day, I identified myself by wearing a branded top and being introduced to others by the leader as a researcher. If individual conversations started, I would remind people of my role and offer them an information sheet. To avoid undue intrusion, if I noticed a conversation taking place, or a person who did not appear to want to interact, I would quietly move away and leave them alone. This relied upon observing body language and did occur occasionally. I also asked the leader in advance to make me aware if there was anyone I should not approach for any reason (see Appendix 5.3).

Photographs of activities or the space itself were taken but, in order to ensure anonymity these did not contain recognisable people. Finally, the ASA guidelines mention considering offering 'fair return for assistance'. I hoped that my efforts during these activity days, for example, clearing up litter and fly-tipping, helped address this.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is also key to ethical practice (Webster et al., 2014). Participants were informed on the information sheet that their contributions would be kept anonymous. To ensure this, fieldnotes were kept private, and in any written work that could become publicly available (including case study reports and this thesis) names of individuals, groups and the area or city were changed to pseudonyms, bearing no relation to the original participants. Particularly identifiable features, e.g. a person's role in the community / or a campaign or feature of the park, were altered where this could inadvertently reveal the group or individual's identity. Transcripts did retain original names to aid with recall, but these were kept securely on university password protected systems (see data management section later).

This issue became particularly pertinent when interviewing local authority parks teams (see earlier). Great care was taken during these interactions to not inadvertently reveal the identity of a participating Friends Group by, for example, talking about a specific campaign or individual. Instead, examples from other areas were used or deliberately blurred.

Confidentiality for participants was assured via the information sheet. Limits to this (bounded confidentiality), such as if they revealed something concerning re their safety or the safety of others, were explained. Plans as to what to do in these circumstances included discussing with my supervisory team and then, if necessary, passing onto appropriate authorities. However, this situation did not occur in reality.

Data management processes were established to ensure any information resulting from the study was stored in line with university approved processes. Any electronic files (audio files, transcripts, emailed consent forms, photographs) were stored on the secure password protected university computer system. The original audio files, on a handheld device, were

deleted as soon as they had been transferred to this central system. Paper documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Completed consent forms (containing individual names) were kept separate from other data such as transcripts. All files (electronic and paper) are set to be destroyed ten years after the project finishes.

A core principle of research is that it should anticipate potential harms and attempt to minimise the risk of these occurring (ASA, 2011). This applies to both the participants and the researcher. An assessment was therefore undertaken that identified potential hazards including who they might affect, how likely they were and how serious the harm could be. Appropriate control measures were then put in place (Appendix 5.19).

Many of the hazards identified related to personal security as I would be conducting fieldwork in public places in deprived neighbourhoods. These issues were therefore carefully considered, with reference both to the university lone-working policy and previous experience working in similar areas. Control measures included only visiting known groups, during day-light hours, leaving details of the visit with a 'buddy' and activating my phone's 'live' location. Any formal discussions were held in public buildings such as community centres.

The reality of visiting some of the green spaces was, at times, slightly intimidating, with some neighbourhoods feeling quite hostile. To mitigate, before the first visit I would talk to the person I was meeting and check how safe the site was. I researched different travel options, learning the route so I did not have to refer to my phone whilst travelling. In more challenging areas, I travelled by car to avoid lone walking, parking somewhere with an easy escape route or meeting a contact in a café beforehand and then travelling in convoy. The leaders of the groups, or the partners, were key to feeling safe, their local knowledge of the community was invaluable, and they looked after me carefully. Whilst at times the neighbourhood felt threatening, no individuals that I interacted with caused any concerns, they tended to be pleased that I was visiting their area.

The university ethics process

Before any fieldwork commenced the study had to receive ethical approval via the Leeds Beckett University ethics process. This involved the researcher submitting detailed information relating to all aspects of data collection, for example, recruitment, tools, data management and key ethical considerations, along with the material to be used, via the online system. It would then be categorised into a risk category and reviewed.

As the study was developmental and involved three phases, the decision was made to submit a series of applications as data collection progressed and details were firmed up. Four applications were made in total. All were categorised as Risk level 2 and approved first time by the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator, as follows: April 2018 (ref: 48891), September 2018 (ref: 50783), January 2019 (ref: 56255) and June 2019 (ref: 61118).

Ethical considerations were paramount in how this study was designed and conducted. This means both adhering to approved processes, but also the principles of ethical practice to ensure participant wellbeing was central to the study. With the more formal data collection methods e.g. interviews, there was a good 'fit' with ethical guidelines i.e. attaining informed consent. However, in some interactions, balancing people's desire to speak informally (e.g. joining in with an on-going interview or during participant observations) with formal ethical processes was challenging. Whilst I always tried to ensure people were fully informed about the study, it was difficult during busy, social occasions. Reflecting on any concerns I had in field-notes, and discussing these with my supervisors, was helpful in adjusting my practice and reassuring myself that I was behaving as ethically as possible. Ultimately, I am comfortable that any opinions or data contained in this study was obtained ethically and that any participants reading it, or any outcomes from it, would recognise that their input and privacy preferences have been respected.

Analysis

This section describes how the data was analysed. It outlines the key influences and principles of the analysis approach, explains the decisions made, before describing the process undertaken.

The aim of qualitative analysis is to transform "*mountains of raw data*" (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) into a 'story' that answers the research questions. Mason (2018) calls it "*making sense*" whilst Miles et al. (2019) say it is about "*meaning making*". Identifying and describing themes is necessary, but not sufficient (Bazeley, 2009). Instead, the aim should be to provide 'explanations' for the phenomena studied, albeit these may be loose and with varying degrees of certainty (Ritchie and Ormston, 2014). The end result must be "*coherent, comprehensive and communicable*" (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) whilst Richards (2005), outline five signs of analysis sufficiency; simplicity, coherence, completeness, robustness and that it makes sense to relevant audiences.

A variety of qualitative research texts informed the analysis approach (Bazeley, 2009; LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Spencer et al., 2014a; Mason, 2018; Miles et al. 2019; Silverman, 2019). Each one contributed to learning. The ladder of abstraction in Spencer et al. (2014a) was useful, whilst Miles et al's (2019) discussion of how to define a case was influential. Similarly, LeCompte and Schensul (2010) broadened my perspective on what can be considered 'data'.

Whilst there are many similarities between texts in terms of ideas and principles (see below), the analysis process varied in terms of its level of structure / rigidity, and terminology. Decisions therefore were made as to which approach and process most suited this study's objectives, its approach and available data. Silverman's (2019) advice is that, whilst researchers do not need to 'tag' your analysis approach you do need to do it "*thoroughly and well*" (p114).

The texts that proved most influential in terms of analysis approach and process were Mason (2018) and Bazeley (2009). Both suggested processes that were rigorous, clear and intellectually sound. Mason (2018) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of cross case vs case study analysis (see later) and this proved particularly influential. Also, the process they described was not as rigid and structured as some of the others (e.g. Spencer et al., 2014b), and this felt in-keeping with the naturalistic approach of the research.

Common principles from the above texts, helped guide the analysis. One relates to 'abstracting'. The analysis process needs to move from specifics and particulars (local understandings) to broader more generalisable ones (Spencer et al., 2014a). LeCompte and Schensul (2010) talk about moving from 'operational' thinking (being close to the data) to 'conceptual' thinking, or paradigms. Most authors advise starting with what is concrete and tangible, before moving to more abstract explanations.

A second principle is that of following an iterative or recursive process. Mason (2018) advises moving backwards and forwards between raw data and the findings, coming up with ideas, checking and revising them, continually questioning whether the findings fit. Miles et al. (2019) call this a "*fluid and humanistic*" way of meaning making. Data therefore needs to be organised in a way that makes this possible.

A third principle is that of ensuring findings are based on evidence, and not just what stands out. Most authors avoid using the word 'validity' instead advising researchers to continually question whether their explanations are plausible, sturdy and confirmable. Triangulation, as discussed earlier, aids confirmation and corroboration (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) as does interrogating negative occurrences or divergent views (Bazeley, 2009). A common

piece of advice is to keep revising interpretations throughout the process and not jump too early to conclusions.

Ensuring a systematic and cognitive process is followed, was the fourth guiding principle. Hunches and ideas, for example, need to be explored creatively but, to ensure transparency and to check the evidence, these need to be documented (Mason, 2018). Being self-aware as a researcher is critical, as one's own experience, perspective and knowledge are intertwined throughout the analysis (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Miles et al., 2019). Engaging in 'active epistemological thinking' and not just following a system is therefore urged (Mason, 2018). The use of 'jottings' (research reflections on transcripts and fieldnotes) and 'analytical memos' (ideas, questions, hypotheses to explore) is suggested by Miles et al. (2019).

One other consideration is how inductive or not the researcher should be when categorising data (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Categories (or themes) can be derived from a conceptual framework, 'mundane' aspects of the data, or they can be generated inductively – or a combination of all three. Silverman (2019) advises keeping focused on your research objectives and excluding data that does not help answer them.

Key analytical decisions

Bearing the above principles in mind a number of decisions were made in relation to this study's data analysis.

The decision was made to have a broad interpretation of what counts as 'data', as advocated by LeCompte and Schensul (2010). This includes interview transcripts and field-notes but also photographs, follow-up emails, reflective notes, contextual documents (e.g. Friends Groups constitutions / policies) and leaflets. These documents help provide a deeper understanding of the data and the context. A full list of what was included as data is provided in Appendices 5.20 and 5.21.

Considering how to 'read' data, whether that is a literal, interpretive or reflexive reading, is another decision to make (Mason, 2018; Silverman, 2019). For this study, it was considered important to read interpretively, whereby what it means, represents and signifies is considered, as the aim is to provide practical recommendations, based on in-depth understanding. Silverman (2019) urges researchers to take a constructionist view of reality whereby one does not assume what is said accurately reflects everyday life, as how people portray themselves depends on relationships and situations. Dialogue, including when and

how, participants express themselves was therefore considered an important part of analysis.

Deciding what counts as a case also needs consideration. A 'case' is defined by Huberman and Miles as a "*phenomenon of some sort occurring in a 'bounded context'*" and serves as the unit of analysis (2002, p24). In this study, each Friends Group was considered a case. This includes the people involved, the activities they do, positioned in one place i.e. the green space. In most cases this was straightforward but it was less so with two of the groups (Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF) and Friends of Wilde Meadows) where there was overlap in terms of some individuals, and some of the location, but differences in terms of timing and membership. They were therefore treated as two separate cases (see Chapter 6 'participating groups').

Phase 3 data (from local authorities), after deliberation, was not included in the aforementioned cases. This is because there was not always an overlap between a Friends Group and a local authority, and the perspective of the latter was broader, being city-wide, compared to the place-specific data from phases 1 and 2. In addition, due to the ethical concerns highlighted earlier, specific examples raised in earlier phases were not directly discussed with local authority participants. Phase 3 data was therefore analysed separately.

Whether to analyse 'cross case' or by case study was the final decision made. Data can be analysed 'horizontally' i.e. cross-case analysis or 'vertically' via case study analysis (Mason, 2018). The former involves looking across cases to pull out common themes or patterns via coding, the latter involves exploring specifics in terms of narrative and context. Mason (2018) urges researchers to consider what is best for their study and not always opt for the more common cross-case analysis.

This decision was the biggest dilemma in terms of analysis, as both approaches could yield relevant insights. One research objective, for example was to identify common success factors and barriers to mobilisation and this would appear to favour cross-case analysis. Conversely, Mason (2018) says case study analysis is appropriate when one is interested in distinctiveness / uniqueness and the workings and development of processes, and that you place great emphasis on context. All of which are true in this study.

The proposed process for Phase 1 & 2 data (see below) was therefore to incorporate both vertical and horizontal analysis in order to ensure contextual case specific understandings were gained, but also allowing common factors to be identified. Using both strategies is an acceptable approach for qualitative researchers (Mason, 2018). Phase 3 data was analysed

using cross-case analysis as, the data was less context specific and more about identifying patterns across cases.

Analysis process

Qualitative research authors recommend a series of analytical stages or steps, all following the principle of moving from the concrete or tangible to the more abstract and theoretical. A general pattern is that initial stages involve data organisation, before describing it in some way, then developing interpretative or explanatory accounts, before applying to wider theory or policy. Spencer et al. (2014b) propose three main steps (data management, descriptive accounts and explanatory accounts) with nine sub-steps, whilst Bazeley (2009) suggests three main steps; describing, comparing and relating. Mason (2018) splits data analysis into two main steps – data organising, followed by data interpretation, where the researcher looks for patterns or stories and poses relevant questions.

For this study a specific process was developed, based most closely on Mason's (2018) approach and suggested steps. This is described below, first for Friends Group data, then local authorities.

Friends Group data (Phases 1 & 2)

Step 1 of the analysis process was to remind myself of the theoretical framework and research questions, as suggested by Silverman (2019) who stresses the importance of keeping the analysis focused and related to conceptual understandings.

Step 2 was organising the data. This included listing what data was available, in what form. See Appendices 5.20 and 5.21 for a full list of data utilised.

Established group data (x5) included both contextual and generated data. The latter included eleven recorded interviews with seventeen participants (transcribed), researcher photographs and reflective fieldnotes (x5). A large amount of contextual information was also utilised. This included information about the green space itself (leaflets / guides / lists of activities / events and, in one case, a local history book) and documents relating to the Friends Groups (policies, operational documents, newspaper articles).

Developing group data (x2) consisted mainly of reflective field-notes, with ten sets of notes for one group and eight for the other, with accompanying photographs. Other generated data included four recorded and transcribed interviews (one group lead, one local resident, two

partners). Handwritten notes supplied by participants, an email interview exchange plus leaflets relating to the local area were also included.

All data, where necessary, was made 'solid' (Mason, 2018). This included transcribing any recordings, typing up field-notes, writing summaries of leaflets / key documents and describing any photographs. This ensured all the disparate types of data became more consistent and accessible, in a uniform format.

Step 3 was to produce a narrative account of each case study, entitled '*The story of...*' that told their story in a comprehensive and contextual way, particular to them. These drew all the different types of data together to give one rich in-depth, account for each group. Each one contained factual information, maps, photographs, snippets from field-notes and quotes from interviews.

Each narrative account was arranged in a way that made sense for that case, as opposed to aiming for uniformity (Mason, 2018). However typical sections included my approach, the visit(s), the area, the space, the group (processes and life cycle), activities/ key achievements, a profile of key individuals (background, motivations, personalities, roles), partners and their relationship with the council. They also contained a section on issues, success factors, reflections as well as initial analytical interpretations.

Writing these accounts aided familiarisation and imposed order on the data – rather than multiple disparate sources of information across time-frames, for each Friends Group there was now one organised, detailed and reflective account. Writing them also started the process of identifying patterns and developing explanations. To give a sense of scale, Table 5.7 shows the number of pages in each narrative account (126 in total).

Table 5.7: Case study narrative accounts

	Established Groups					Developing Groups	
	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF)	Gaskell Park	River Round	Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Page numbers per account	14	16	21	13	14	28	20

These narrative accounts became the source documents for analysis, whilst the original documents could still be referred to, these were the main documents used going forwards. Please note, they are not included as appendices, as due to their specific and particular nature, they would compromise anonymity.

Step 4 was to search for emerging patterns and explanations by asking analytical questions of the data, from ideas and hunches that had formed whilst undertaking the research. Mason (2018) advises keeping notes of these and checking to compare differences and similarities between groups, to see if they help explain the data, or not.

To aid this process I developed a series of matrices (Chapter 7) that compared groups levels of success (see Chapter 6 'success') with potential success factors (explanations). Whether or not the factor patterned with success could then be assessed. For example, how the group started out was identified as a potential success factor but when this was compared across groups, no explanatory pattern emerged. Whereas when the confidence of the leader was plotted, this did. These factors are discussed in the results chapters 6,7 & 8 but are mentioned here to help explain the analysis process.

The process of analysing the local authority data will now be described, before returning to how a higher level of concept was formed.

Local authority data (phase 3)

As discussed previously, local authority data was analysed thematically cross-case. The aim was to identify common themes or patterns to develop a better understanding of the local authority perspective on the role of, and their working relationship with Friends Groups. The data consisted of transcripts from five interviews, involving seven participants. A profile of participants is in Chapter 8.

In order to conduct the cross-case analysis, a coding framework was developed. Whilst many different terminologies exist, in this study the word 'code' was used to denote a unit of text, with sub-codes used to break these down further. Miles et al.'s (2019) advice on types of codes informed the coding framework; they can be descriptive, In Vivo, process related or 'affective' relating to emotions or values.

The aim was to keep the framework relatively simple with enough codes to avoid vagueness but not so many that they become overly precise (Mason, 2018). Familiarisation with the data, 'jottings' and knowledge of the research questions were used to generate an initial list

of codes. These were then sketched into a provisional framework that was tested, refined and finalised (Mason, 2018; Silverman, 2019). The final framework contained nine main codes, with 29 sub-codes, some descriptive (e.g. benefits of Friends Groups) others more emotive (e.g. impact on morale / sadness). See Appendix 5.22. NVivo 12 was used to code the transcripts, helping organise the data, allowing for closer interrogation of the themes.

The final stage of data analysis is to develop explanations for the phenomena being studied (Lewis et al., 2014). This can be a concept, a model or a framework but it needs to be at a higher level than the specifics of each case, helping to develop meaning (Bazeley, 2009; Mason, 2018). In this study, the above process, led to four 'domains' being identified that help explain the success factors of Friends Groups. These are described in the results Chapters 7 & 8, and summarised diagrammatically in Chapter 9.

Data analysis therefore followed a rigorous, thorough process influenced by key qualitative researchers. The process described above enabled the data to move from specifics to explanations, from 'mountains of raw data' to 'sense making'. The decision to utilise both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' analysis enabled the particulars of each case to be fully explored, whilst also enabling comparisons across cases to be made (Mason, 2018). The five signs of analysis sufficiency provided by Richards (2005), simplicity, coherence, completeness, robustness and that it makes sense, have hopefully therefore been met.

Reflexivity

This final section scrutinizes my role in the research process and the outcomes of it. Whilst throughout the chapter I have reflected on individual parts of the study, here I will focus on overall aspects (Cooper 2016, Mason, 2018).

The first is how my identity potentially affected participants' responses, 'positionality' (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Cooper, 2016). Some parts of my identity, namely being a middle-aged female, seemed to help people open up and respond positively to me. I tended to be slightly younger than most participants, but not by a great deal, so I felt relatable. As a woman I was not threatening to other women and they seemed to see me as someone they could connect with, whilst older male participants tended to want to explain things to me, which was also useful. I am white British, as were most participants, and this potentially meant there were less cultural barriers to overcome. Had I been interviewing participants with a different ethnic background this could have been more of an issue. Arguably, had I

been from a more diverse community, I might have been able to access a wider range of perspectives. Discussing ethnicity often felt like a sensitive topic, with participants being careful with their language whilst talking to me. See Chapter 9 'strengths and limitations'.

One part of my identity that, at times, acted as a barrier was being a professional person (from a university) who was clearly middle-class and 'Southern' (often interpreted as "posh"). Some of the more professional or confident participants responded positively to this, seeming to see me as able to help explain the phenomena. Those who did not have professional backgrounds initially appeared less comfortable, possibly seeing me as an outsider or 'an expert'. This manifested as being a little guarded, presenting a more public face, saying perhaps what they thought I wanted to hear. Spending time with people in informal settings doing activities together, and being interested in them, helped break-down this barrier. I dressed carefully so looked un-threatening, yet respectable and brought food to share. I like people and come across as warm and friendly and that helped too.

The second aspect reflected on is how my background (including my values and beliefs, discussed in the prologue) affected how I conducted the research and interpreted the results.

I believe strongly in the importance of protecting the environment, both for its own sake and for its benefits to humans. This did lead, at times, to discomfort when I saw actions that negatively impacted it. I was careful to not reveal my opinions but it did possibly affect my view of those acting in that way. Seeking to understand their view and their circumstances, and the area's history, meant that, whilst I did not agree, I reached a point where I could understand.

Another key value I hold is the importance of tackling inequality and, having worked in deprived areas for many years, I tend to see the positives in such neighbourhoods. I can be quite defensive of them, especially when negative assumptions are made. This could lead to a tendency to being unwilling to see more negative aspects or be critical of people living in deprived areas. Spending time with participants who were often more openly critical of others, helped address this bias. I am still apprehensive about communicating negative aspects of deprived communities as it can be misinterpreted and used to cast aspirations on everybody, however I recognise that these issues cannot be ignored, as that does not help those trying to improve the area. Talking to partners assisted, as they also tend to be in the 'middle ground' between these neighbourhoods and more professional organisations.

The third question to consider is how conducting the research affected me as a researcher. Conducting the field-work made me very aware of the gap between the ideas and evidence

in academia / policy making and the reality of what was taking place on the ground. This was exacerbated by attending conferences and working with policy makers to evaluate neighbourhood empowerment projects which, despite being well-intentioned, often felt overly optimistic, 'top-down' and lacking in understanding. This led to me becoming frustrated, even angry at times. It also made me question the typical approach of academia, in presenting oneself as dispassionate and objective, when viewing injustice and structural imbalances.

The passion, energy and enthusiasm of the Friends, and their commitment to making change happen, made me question some of my assumptions. Health promotion practices, and academia, often operate very slowly, with a focus on encouragement, support and building evidence. Whilst this is important, the groups demonstrated how having a vision, a sense of urgency and being able to inspire people is hugely important for change. Given the urgency and the scale of current environmental, health and social challenges it made me more critical of the slow speed of academic, policy and professional systems.

These factors led to me being both more committed to staying connected to communities and also more determined to focus on actively making positive change happen, both professionally and personally.

The final area to consider is whether the research itself was justifiable. My belief is this research did need to be done, largely because of the gap between policy expectations of and assumptions about communities, and what the communities themselves are experiencing. Participants were frustrated by their lack of influence with policy makers and local authorities and would urge me to help them get their message across. I therefore feel a responsibility to ensure the results are disseminated effectively, and also guilty that it has taken me so long.

Trustworthiness and authenticity

This chapter has presented detailed information on how this study was undertaken, in order to ensure it could effectively answer the defined aims and objectives, in an ethical way. It also shows how the study sought to maximise authenticity and trustworthiness; essential to ensuring credibility (Ormston et al., 2014; Mason, 2018; Amin et al., 2020). This included prolonged engagement with groups, over time, in order to build trust and break down barriers between the researcher and participants (Lincoln and Guba, 2004). Scrupulous record keeping of observations, thoughts and findings enhanced rigour and trustworthiness, as did keeping a detailed record of how data was collected and analysed; from 'raw'

interview data, through to the development of themes and higher-level concepts (Amin et al., 2020). Triangulation, of method and participants, ensured a fuller, more '3D' picture of the phenomena of interest could be built, again enhancing trustworthiness (Bryman, 2008). Finally, as will be seen in the results chapters, the sample included a variety of cases, some of which were 'deviant' in that they provided an alternative perspective to the others being studied (Amin et al., 2020). This increased understanding, as it required deeper interrogation of initial themes and findings. The research and analysis process therefore enabled thick, contextual descriptions to be generated, to help build trustworthiness in the findings. These are now presented in the next three results chapters.

Chapter 6: Results; case-studies, activities, and success

This is the first of three results chapters. It starts by presenting an overview of the case-studies and how they fit the sampling criteria outlined in Chapter 5. It then describes and categorises their main activities, to address objective 1. The final part addresses the issue of success; first identifying its different aspects and then assessing this by individual group. This enables success factors to be identified and discussed, which form the core of Chapters 7 & 8.

Participating groups

Seven Friends Groups were recruited to this study, five categorised as ‘established’ and two as ‘developing’. This fits the criteria of seven groups (see Chapter 5), but the balance was slightly different, with one more established group and one less developing. This was partly due to the difficulty of categorising groups until visits had been arranged, and partly due to trying to balance other criteria relating to ethnicity and location.

Participating groups are shown in Table 6.1, categorised into established or developing, along with their approximate start date and regional location.

Table 6.1: Participating groups, type and length in existence

	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	River Round	Gaskell Park	TBCF	Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Group type: Established (E) or Developing (D)	E	E	E	E	E (no longer operating)	D	D
Years in existence (in current form)	2001 - current	2003 - current	2012 approx. – current	2004 (reinvigorated 2014) - current	2004/5 - 2013	Between 2013 and 2018. Ended 2019.	Never fully established
Location	London	South Yorkshire	South Yorkshire	West Yorkshire	West Yorkshire	West Yorkshire	West Yorkshire

Most of the established groups had been operational for many years. The longest surviving group, the Friends of Hardy Rec, had existed, in its current form and with the same Chair for

17 years at the time of my visit, and the youngest, the Friends of River Round for approximately seven years.

Identifying an exact start date was not always possible as some groups had undergone several iterations, with changes in members, format and remit. Judgement was used therefore to decide when the group, recognisable in its current form, started. The Friends of Norton Park, for example, initially formed in 2000 but its first two iterations failed to progress. The later start date of 2003 was therefore used as this was when the current leaders became involved and started to act. A counter example is Friends of Gaskell Park. The group was formally set up in 2004, with the existing Chair. After a few years, the group lost members and stopped doing activities. It was re-invigorated in 2014 with new members and a new committee. The start date was kept as 2004 as the same Chair was in position and thus it is still recognisable as the same group. The cited start date therefore gives a sense of longevity but, as groups 'ebb and flow', it is not entirely definitive.

Two participating groups, Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF) and Friends of Wilde Meadows, are 'linked' case-studies. The former existed between 2004/5 and 2013 and covered an area of green space running from the north of a city to the south. When the group ended, the aim was for a series of Friends Groups to be set up to continue their work. The Friends of Wilde Meadows was one of these. There are some connections to TBCF, in that one individual was in both and it is part of the same area. However, the differences are substantial; TBCF covered a larger area, had a broader remit, a different leader and existed at a different time. A decision was therefore taken to treat the groups as separate but linked case studies.

Two 'developing' groups i.e., those who were at an early stage in their journey and were fairly small-scale, participated. Significant time was spent with each but both experienced difficulties and, for reasons discussed later, failed to mobilise and become established.

The Friends of Wilde Meadows initially fitted the criteria for a 'developing' group. They were a small but committed group aiming to improve their local green space and encourage the local community to engage with it. A year later however, the leader had become demotivated and decided to end the group. The second group categorised as 'developing', Raven Hill, was identified by the YCC. They had received funds to work with local people in certain city wards to improve the green spaces there, including developing Friends Groups. Given our mutual interest in this phenomena, they invited me to observe this process over time. Raven Hill was identified as a suitable site where there was good potential for a Friends Group to form, as residents had already started taking care of the space. It therefore

appeared to be an ideal opportunity to observe the formation of a Friends Group, from the start. Despite these expectations, and concerted efforts from the YCC and other partners, a Friends Group did not form. The Raven Hill case study therefore focuses on the local area context, the attempts of partners to support residents in forming a group and on the views of the residents identified as potential Friends Group leaders.

Despite therefore identifying two ‘developing’ groups, both did not progress as initially anticipated. This was disappointing for the key players but provides useful learnings for this study. The term ‘developing’ seems, with hindsight, presumptive. A better term perhaps is ‘fledgling’ as this carries within it the implication that, whilst there is potential, it may not ever fully develop.

Local area criteria

One criterion was that all participating groups should be in areas of high deprivation (top 20% using IMD measure – Chapter 5 ‘sampling’). As can be seen in Table 6.2, all met this criterion, with six being in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods and four in the most deprived 5%. Friends of the River Round covered a larger geographic area (as it followed the course of a river and a canal) so data for all nine relevant postcodes was examined, with eight meeting the deprivation criteria (one, a regenerated city centre area, did not).

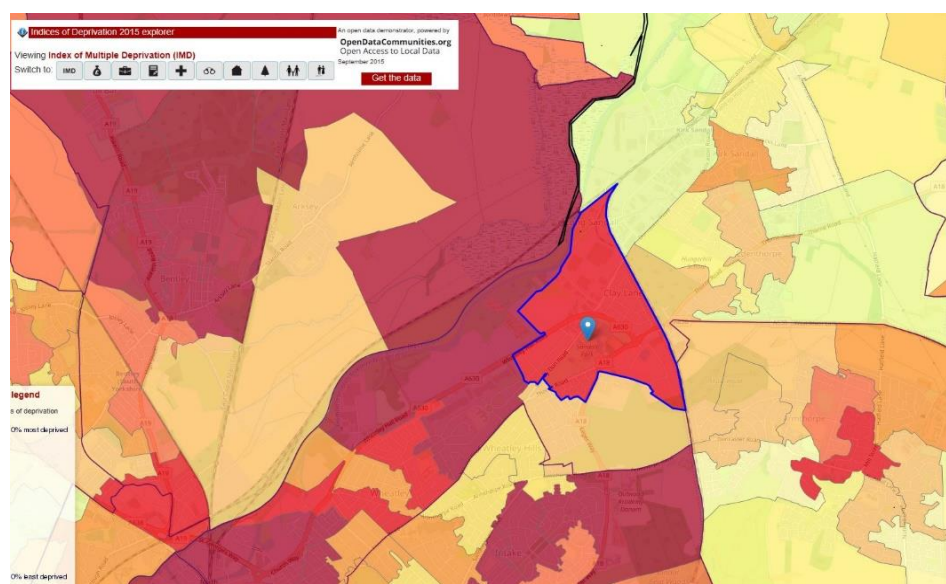
Table 6.2: Deprivation of local area, by group

Friends Of...	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	River Round	Gaskell Park	Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF)	Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Deprivation ‘rank’ of neighbourhood (LSOA). Out of 32,844, where 1 is the most deprived.	1800	5531	447 (for 8/9 postcodes covered)	2612	1144	1144	279
Percentile of deprivation	5%	17%	1%	8%	4%	4%	1%

Whilst the green spaces exact areas were categorised as deprived, nearly all had more affluent neighbourhoods close to them. See, for example Figure 6.1 - the green space is marked by a location pin, the red sections are more deprived LSOAs and the yellow areas

more affluent. This shows that more affluent areas exist close to the park. The relevance of this is that visitors to the spaces, and indeed Friends Group members, cannot be assumed to be from deprived neighbourhoods, they may come from a range of backgrounds. The one exception to this is Tarn Beck / Wilde Meadows. Here, all surrounding neighbourhoods had a high level of deprivation.

Figure 6.1: Deprivation map of Norton Park area (OpenDataCommunities.org, 2018)



The second local area criterion related to ensuring there was variation between cases in terms of population ethnicity. As can be seen in Table 6.3 this was achieved (average figures for England are in the LH column, sites with higher than average are in bold). All areas except one (Norton Park), were more ethnically diverse than average. There were higher proportions than average of Asian people in five areas, and Black people in three. All had higher proportions identifying as 'other' and four had more people than average who identified as 'Mixed' ethnicity.

Table 6.3: Local area ethnicity (MSOA)

Friends Of...	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	River Round	Gaskell Park	TBCF	Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
% of population identified with:							
White	57%	87%	20%	28%	57%	57%	35%

(England average is 82%)							
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh (England average is 9.6%)	9%	5%	42%	64%	16%	16%	53%
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, African (England average is 4.2%)	18%	2%	20%	3%	19%	19%	4%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (England average is 3%)	7%	2%	3%	3%	5%	5%	4%
Other (England average is 2.2%)	10%	3%	16%	3%	3%	3%	4%

As per the sampling criteria, most groups were located within easy reach of West Yorkshire. One group (Friends of Hardy Rec), as planned, was located outside Northern England, in London. They were selected as they were a successful, nationally recognised group, and one of their leaders had specific expertise. Five different local authorities were covered by the case-studies with Gaskell Park and Raven Hill being in the same city, as were TBCF and Wilde Meadows.

Group criteria

These selection criteria aimed to ensure a diversity of organisations in terms of key members.

The aim of including at least one mixed gender group, one male dominated and one female dominated was achieved. See Table 6.4. Three established groups were run largely by men, one largely by women, and one had a mixed gender leadership team. Both developing

groups were led by women. This data relates to the group leaders only, all had other members that contributed that did not necessarily follow the same gender pattern.

Table 6.4: Group leaders' gender

Friends of...	Hardy Rec (HR)	Norton Park (NP)	River Round (RR)	Gaskell Park (GP)	TBCF	Wilde Meadows (WM)	Raven Hill (RH)
Gender of group leaders	Male	Mixed – one F, one M.	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female

The aim was to include at least one group with a high proportion of ethnic minority members. This was not achieved however, with all group leaders appearing to be white British. Please note, participants were not asked to categorise their ethnicity, as this felt at odds with the naturalistic form of the data collection. Assumptions were made instead based on conversations about their background. After visiting the first three groups and noting that participants were all white British, a group was recruited in an area with a very high proportion of British Asian people. However, the Friends of Gaskell Park, as an organisation, was also largely (though not exclusively) white British. Potential reasons for this were discussed with one of the group leaders (Chapter 7, 'people').

A final criterion was that all groups should have at least three members. Ascertaining the size of the groups was more challenging than anticipated but all (other than Raven Hill) met this criterion. Most established groups had a small number of key members or leaders, a larger group of people who attend meetings or volunteer, and then a wider group of 'interested' people in the community (e.g. signing petitions, 'liking' on Facebook or on email lists). Friends of Norton Park, for example, had a committee of 6-8 people, 20-25 'members', and 7000 Facebook 'likes'. Whilst Friends of Wilde Meadows technically had more than three members, nearly all activity and communication emanated from one person, so as time progressed, they started to feel less like a 'group' and more like one person's mission.

To summarise, seven Friends Groups were recruited to participate, with all except one of the sampling criteria being met. All groups were located in areas of high deprivation, with diverse populations in terms of ethnicity. There was a mix of group leaders in terms of gender, but a lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity. Most established groups had been operating for over fifteen years. Recruiting 'developing' groups was more challenging as, despite identifying two with potential, they failed to thrive.

Activities

An overview of the various activities performed by participating Friends Groups is now given. Each group's main activities and their key focuses are presented first. Activities are then categorised into 'types' and discussed. Please note that, due to the sheer number of activities undertaken and the difficulty of capturing them all during relatively brief visits, not every single one is included.

Main activities by group

Table 6.5 demonstrates the quantity and breadth of activities undertaken by the Friends Groups.

The scope and the ambition of the groups varied greatly. Some (e.g., Friends of River Round) have relatively modest ambitions, being content to focus on improving the quality of the environment around the river and canal and encourage others to appreciate it. Other groups (e.g. TBCF and Friends of Hardy Rec) had very high ambitions, bidding for large amounts of funding and being involved in managing the spaces. It is possible this relates to the longevity of groups, but this was not the impression gained during interactions – the Friends of the River Round for example said they did not want additional funds or responsibilities; they were happy just *"messaging about on the water"*.

Another difference between groups is that some were very 'hands on', delivering the majority of activities themselves, whilst others adopted more of a lobbying or management approach (similar to physical vs civic activities in Figure 2.1, Fors et al., 2015). Friends of Gaskell Park, for example, were very 'hands on' running the café, baking and selling everything themselves and delivering creative and health related activities. Other groups had a more indirect involvement via fundraising bids or lobbying. TBCF, for example, were part of a large bid to transform the green space, that then employed paid staff to deliver. They also lobbied the local authority for changes to the area's designation (see later). There was a tendency for the more ambitious Friends Groups to be more 'hands off' (Friends of Hardy Rec and TBCF) and the less ambitious to be more 'hands on' (Friends of River Round, Wilde Meadows and Gaskell Park). This was not universal though; the Friends of Norton Park were both very ambitious and very hands-on.

It should be noted that these observations were made at differing times in the groups development. Whilst the more established groups were reflecting back on past activities, it

was not possible for the newer groups to predict their future direction. What is perhaps the focus of activities at the start of their journey may change as they progress. Many of the newer groups were focused on tackling litter, fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour to make the space more acceptable to others. It could be that once this improved, they would move onto other types of activities.

Table 6.5: Activities by group

Friends of Norton Park (Established 15 years)	
Focus:	Main activities:
Crime prevention	Improving sight-lines by reducing hedges, felling trees, lifting tree canopies. Removing 'dark corners'. Tackling antisocial behaviour – challenging directly, monitoring
Facility improvement (accessibility)	Installing picnic areas, trails, bird boxes, information boards, fitness stations, dog exercise area. Accessibility focused.
Lobbying	Lobbying local authority to keep toilets open / placing of facilities (safety reasons)
Maintenance	Painting, cleaning toilets, litter picking, planting Fundraising (significant amounts) for facilities / improvements Encouraging members to take-on areas of the park Run some events (music festival) but focus on making the park so nice other groups (e.g. Park Run) want to use it. Help groups with bureaucracy. Corporate volunteering
Friends of Hardy Rec (Established 17 years)	
Focus:	Main activities:
Co-management	Partner in major funding bids (multi-million) to transform park. Friends Group decide on how money spent. Work collaboratively with local authority re park developments.
Major fundraising	Encouraging sub-groups e.g. woodland group, wildlife group by providing an infrastructure for them.
Community empowerment	Building Community Hub (café, activities). Friends Group chair the co-operative that run the hub. Campaigned against major landscaping, for water quality improvements. River uncovered, planted, footbridges built Consultations with local residents Park maintenance (with local authority) – painting, replacing, planting
Tarn Beck Valley Community Forum (established 9 years, now ended)	

Focus: Planning Lobbying Major fundraising	Main activities: Lobbying local authority re designating Local Nature Reserves Partner (community voice) in major funding bid to improve environment and engage community Lobbying local authority re how funding spent / building footbridge to link areas Via funding – improved infrastructure (cycle ways, information boards) Via funding – volunteering, educational activities Encouraging formation of Friends Groups / community activism
Friends of Gaskell Park (established 15 years)	
Focus: Community Health and wellbeing Lobbying	Main activities: Running café as community hub Running community events e.g. Pop-up Farm, Easter Egg Hunts Loaning play equipment Consulting with local people Links to schools / promoting space e.g. local authority website Hosting refugees as volunteers Organising creative activities (art / photography) Running health activities - 'health walks' / yoga sessions, awareness events Fundraising / installed play trail, with leaflet Conservation activities – bird counts, making bird boxes Lobbying for improved play facilities (petitions / press coverage, presenting to local authority) Litter picks / challenging minor anti-social behaviour, reporting major ASB
Friends of the River Round (established approximately 7 years)	
Focus: Tackling fly-tipping Maintenance Awareness	Main activities: 'Work-days' - weekly and monthly Removing fly-tipping / rubbish from the river, the canal and banks Reporting / preventing fly-tipping (liaise with local businesses) Cutting back vegetation / removing invasive species Maintaining / laying paths Working with schools to educate re river 'Trout in the classroom' Engaging with local businesses Recruiting volunteers via events, radio, press, social media Painting fixtures and fittings Promoting group at community events
Friends of Wilde Meadows (developing)	
Focus:	Main activities: Tree / hedge planting Planting nature-friendly bulbs, 'plugs,' cleaning out pond

Conservation / nature	Advocating for more 'nature-friendly' management – hedge cutting, grass mowing etc. (complaining when nature destroyed)
Tackling antisocial behaviour	Litter picking – regularly and events
Advocacy	Reporting / preventing anti-social behaviour
Promotion	Promoting space – face to face, at community events / social media
	Lobbying (unsuccessfully) for improved facilities (foot-bridge)
	Family activities / events (delivered by partner, funds raised by Friends Group)
	Liaising with partners (schools, restaurants)
	walking group
Raven Hill (yet to be established – activities by partners)	
Focus:	Main activities:
Nature	Nature walks
	Conservation activities e.g. tree felling
	Installing / planting herb beds
Tackling fly-tipping	Clearing up litter / fly-tipping
	Improving infrastructure – gates, signs, paths, benches
Improving facilities	Cutting grass for play area
	Friday campfire club
Community engagement	Creative activities and nature play for children

A final observation relating to the individual groups, is that the focus of their activities was generally closely aligned to the interests and skills of group leaders (see Chapter 7, 'people domain'). The leaders of the Friends of Norton Park, for example, were retired police officers and the group's prime focus was initially crime prevention. The Chair of Friends of Hardy Rec was passionate about community empowerment, the Friends of the River Round leader was a water-enthusiast and the leader of Friends of Wilde Meadows was a keen nature lover. All of these personal interests are reflected in the group's activities (see Table 6.5). Most of the committee of Friends of Gaskell Park belong to a religious establishment and are passionate about community and social justice (the focus of their group) whilst the TBCF leaders were planning and regeneration experts, and they chose to focus on re-designating the green space as Local Nature Reserves (LNRs).

In one case (the Friends of the River Round), the leader joined the group because of his interest, actively seeking a volunteering opportunity associated with water (see Chapter 7). In all other cases however, the focus of the groups appears to have been led, at least in part, by the interests and skills of the leaders. In some cases this fitted, in an extremely fortuitous way, with the needs of the local area. For example, at the start of the Friends Group

involvement, Norton Park was plagued by antisocial behaviour and had become practically un-useable. Having two ex-Police Officers, with an interest in crime prevention, take over the Friends Group was extremely advantageous. It would appear therefore that the direction of the groups is affected by the leader's skills and interests, plus the environment they are operating in.

Activity type

Tackling antisocial behaviour (littering, fly-tipping, dog-fouling, vandalism)

Removing litter and fly-tipping was a common type of activity across groups, especially newer ones. At the start of groups' lifecycles, it often dominated activities. The more established groups focused less on this, as this type of behaviour tended to have decreased. At times, the task of clearing away human debris, was herculean. Raven Hill was dominated by fly-tipping and despite great efforts to clear it, it kept returning.

"Whilst I can see the value of the space, I struggle to appreciate its beauty. This is partly because of its poor state. The first time I visit the space (July 2018) the amount of litter and fly-tipping is staggering. There is a huge mound of rubbish, some of it stinking, at the back of one of the terraces that the whole team, including me, clean up. When I go back in March 2019, mounds of rubbish have accumulated again – bin bags of shoes, toys, bedding, mattresses. There has been a fire where someone has burnt bedding. There is also a lot of glass and bottles. I describe it as "quite overwhelming and dispiriting". At both visits the fly-tipping and litter is cleaned up and put at the entrance to be picked up by the Council (as arranged by YCC). See the picture below for results of this work in March 2019."

(Raven Hill, case-study narrative)

Figure 6.2: Photograph of fly-tipping clean-up, Raven Hill (Woodward, 2019)



The Friends of the River Round worked hard to clean up the river and canal. During my visit, one man, in his 70s, waded thigh-deep across the river to clear rubbish out of a difficult to access area, whilst another group of men delighted in rigging up a pulley system to haul a sodden sofa from the river. They regularly removed fly-tipping that local garages (tyres, engine parts etc) and fast-food restaurants had dumped.

Most groups reported, or encouraged residents to report, fly-tipping (or indeed other anti-social behaviour). The Friends of Wilde Meadows leader described how she now knew who to call for which problem. Two groups actively tried to prevent anti-social behaviour. The Friends of River Round for example, talked to nearby businesses to discourage fly-tipping. They also secured funding to build a fence at a common fly-tipping spot, although this was prevented by a local authority sub-contractor (chapter 8 'being obstructive').

Encouraging residents to monitor the space for anti-social behaviour – acting as “*eyes and ears*” was common across groups. This ranged from relatively minor annoyances, such as picking daffodils and riding quad bikes and motorcycles in the spaces, to more overtly aggressive incidents such as setting fires, vandalism and violence. One Friends Group, led by ex-Police Officers, would confront vandals in-person.

“Some youths had been trying to set light to some play equipment. A volunteer defended it, standing firm whilst surrounded by 15-20 youths. They left and did not return. He (the group leader) will confront people on quad bikes or motorbikes in the park.”

(Friends of Norton Park, case study narrative)

The Friends of Norton Park, quoted above, had a major focus on crime prevention. Initially every improvement they made in the park was rapidly destroyed - plants were pulled out within thirty minutes of being planted, quad bikes would circle the park and wild birds were

being shot. They found this “*soul destroying*” and therefore, used their professional expertise as ex-Police Officers (one of whom specialised in crime prevention) to produce a crime reduction strategy. They set out to improve sight-lines and remove dark corners and hiding places that attracted crime or made people feel unsafe, by reducing the height of hedges, raising tree canopies and asking the local authority to fell large numbers of evergreen trees from the perimeter. They also lobbied for any new equipment to be placed in open, overlooked areas to discourage vandalism; the new picnic area, for example, was positioned next to the car park. ‘Cottaging’ (where men come to public areas looking for sex) was seen as an issue in the toilets, discouraging families from visiting. They therefore asked the local authority to trim the toilet doors to reduce privacy. This strategy had been a success, with much reduced antisocial behaviour:

“Most parks would kill, I mean they would kill for the level of antisocial behaviour we have now, and we’re an urban park, in a deprived area.”

(Friends of Norton Park, joint Leader, focus group)

Having to repeatedly tackle such issues had differing impacts on participants. Some more experienced leaders accepted that things would get damaged, and they needed to not get too upset about it. Here is one, talking about graffiti on a recently renovated installation.

“What we’ve tried to do, you know, is to try and have a positive approach.... You know but inevitably, you do a project, you get something really nice in there and everything gets tagged and changed. But again, that’s life”.

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Leader, interview)

Similarly, when a prominent ‘River Rounder’, was asked if the amount of litter and fly-tipping got him down, said:

“No, you have to focus on what you can do. If you were the type of person who got upset by that, you’d not last long”.

(Friends of River Round, member, interview)

Other participants however, found the continual littering and antisocial behaviour frustrating and demoralising. The Friends of Wilde Meadows leader described it as “*heart-breaking*”.

Maintaining the space

Maintaining the space relates to routine tasks such as painting equipment, cleaning facilities, clearing paths, removing overgrown vegetation and gardening etc. There was considerable variation between groups as to how much maintenance they did.

A couple did a great deal. The Friends of Norton Park did most of the park's routine maintenance including planting flowers, painting equipment and even cleaning the toilets daily. They encouraged local people to take ownership of a particular flower bed or area and organised corporate volunteering groups to do some jobs. The only jobs the parks teams did was to cut the grass and open and close the toilets. The Friends of the River Round spent most of their time doing routine maintenance such as clearing paths and controlling vegetation.

Figure 6.3: Photograph of Friends of the River Round Volunteers (Woodward, 2019)



Most groups were less 'hands on' and relied on paid staff (employed by the local authority parks team) to do routine maintenance. They all closely liaised with (or lobbied) these teams to influence what tasks were done. The Friends of Hardy Rec, for example, held monthly meetings with the parks team to ensure tasks were completed, whilst TBCF lobbied hard to ensure staff paid for by the funding that had been secured, were deployed in that area. Hardy Rec also actively encouraged local people to form sub-groups (see Chapter 7, 'encouraging responsibility') that took ownership of particular spaces or issues.

"We have lots of different sub-groups, or semi or semi-autonomous groups, linked to the Friends, who are involved in managing different bits of the park, or advising on the management of different bits of the park... (...) There's a wildlife group, there's a woodland group, and then there's a tree management group."

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Leader, paired-interview)

Improving facilities

A major part of most groups' activities was to improve the facilities, for people, in the space. This generally, but not always, involved fund-raising. Examples are many and varied, ranging from building and running a new community hub (Hardy Rec) to installing new planters and benches (Raven Hill). The Friends of Norton Park had been very active in this area, installing new fitness trails, play equipment, picnic areas, information boards and planters. TBCF, as partners on a funding bid, helped ensure cycling paths were built and lobbied hard for a footbridge linking two green spaces to be built (see Chapter 7, 'the people domain').

The Friends of Gaskell Park, whilst operating on a more modest scale, had installed a play-trail and renovated an un-used building as a community café (see below).

"(the Vice-Chair) is very good at paperwork and every time you get funding like that you've got to write a report on it, so she does that, she does all that really well. So she applied then, after we put the totem trail in, she applied for £10,000 from National Lottery and that paid for the play trail, and you'll see some... (...) basically climbing, balancing, duck and weave sort of thing."

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, walking interview)

Two groups had had less success improving facilities, due to resistance or reluctance from authorities. The Friends of the River Round had raised funds for some benches but the land-owners refused permission for them to be installed. The Friends of Wilde Meadows repeatedly asked for a footbridge to be repaired (using their own funds), but the local authority did not engage with these requests. This was one reason for the group ending (discussed later).

Running facilities

Running facilities was a less common activity for Friends Groups. The exceptions are the Friends of Gaskell Park, who ran the community café and the Friends of Norton Park who cleaned and maintained the toilets. Whilst the Friends of Hardy Rec did not run facilities directly, they acted as Chairs of the community hub and encouraged other groups to be in charge of certain aspects of the park, for example, the stage area (see Chapter 7, 'encouraging responsibility'.)

Conservation activities

Increasing nature or biodiversity featured strongly in some groups and was the main focus of one (Friends of Wilde Meadows). This group, together with partners, had planted hedges, trees, bulbs and ‘plugs’ to encourage wildlife.

“A long, substantial hedge (200 - 400 trees) had been planted along the Northern edge of the [green space] by the Friends Group. I visited this with [the Leader] (...) and it looked beautiful, she was clearly very proud of it, telling me what mix of trees went into it. See photo and text below from a recent Facebook post by her.”

Figure 6.4: Photographs posted by Friends of Wilde Meadows on Facebook (2019)



“Walk along the Meadows. We planted that Hedgerow about 10 years ago along (named) Lane. Wild Honeysuckle. Lots of different Grasses. Hazel Tree. Damsons” (Facebook post)

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

Friends of Gaskell Park had linked with conservation charities to undertake bird counts and ran sessions to build and install bird boxes. In Hardy Rec, the Friends were part of a fundraising bid that uncovered a previously culverted river. They had then planted native species along the newly uncovered banks (see image below). TBCF led a long, difficult but ultimately successful campaign (see later) to designate five areas as LNRs, meaning they were protected from future developments.

Figure 6.5: Photograph of Hardy Rec de-culverted river (Woodward, 2018)



Conservation awareness raising also featured, with Friends Groups co-ordinating family focused activity sessions (Friends of Gaskell Park, Hardy Rec, Wilde Meadows and TBCF).

“We link up 4 or 5 times a year with conservation groups so next weekend it’s the Big Bird Count for the RSPB. We have them in, in person, later on in the summer with their gazebo and their activities for kids, obviously they are recruiting members, but that works well for us. We did the hedgehog week, we did a bluebell count for Woodland Trust. So it’s basically RSPB, Woodland Trust, Friends of the Earth, (..) are the three that we link up with and just highlight those things.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, focus group)

The Friends of River Round leader helped a partner run ‘Trout in the Classroom’ sessions in schools. They set up tanks in the classrooms, delivered trout eggs and then, when they became ‘fingerlings’ the pupils released them into the local river. He was extremely enthusiastic about this activity.

“[The Leader] learnt a lot in the process, he told me all about the technical requirements for the tanks and the water. He would like to do similar in the future, possibly with eels, as he thinks the pupils will enjoy handling them and it is slightly easier technically”

(Friends of River Round, case study narrative)

The emphasis on conservation was less in Friends of Norton Park. Whilst some nature friendly areas were created (e.g. a bog garden) and improvements made to the pond area, the emphasis on safety and sight-lines meant the removal of vegetation and tidying up messy, more natural areas. In this case, there appeared to be a tension between creating safe spaces for humans and biodiversity.

“Their status as volunteers and the amount of effort they put in means it feels churlish to question some of the approaches they have taken. However, there were a couple of aspects of their approach that troubled me. One is that with all the emphasis on crime prevention and usage there was little focus on nature – for example bio-diversity or climate change mitigation. Reducing hedges and trees improves sight-lines but leaves less room for nature.”

(Friends of Norton Park, case-study narrative)

Fundraising

Fundraising, mainly for infrastructure improvements, was a large part of the activities of most groups. Two, TBCF and Hardy Rec, were partners in very large, successful lottery bids that ran for a number of years and led to substantial improvements in the green spaces. Both said that, without their input, the bids were unlikely to have been successful.

“in order to meet the criteria for the lottery they [the local authority and other partners] had to find a community partner and we fitted that essential element. If we hadn’t been there the lottery wouldn’t have touched them with a barge pole.”

(TBCF, ex-Leader, interview)

The Friends of Norton Park raised substantial amounts of money via direct fundraising. The Chair would regularly apply for bids and win funds. Their approach was to only ask for money that they had definite projects for, and then break these down into smaller jobs that people could contribute to. The new picnic area, for example, had cost approximately £50,000 but this had been broken down into items such as a new table or some trees. Friends of Gaskell Park had applied for and received modest amounts of funding for projects such as the new play trail.

Two groups (Friends of the River Round and Wilde Meadows) were less interested in raising funds, saying they only needed small amounts of money to operate and had sufficient.

“They have fairly limited funds, just a couple of thousand in the bank. [Leader] says they don’t need any more than a couple of thousand a year as the improvements they can do are restricted. The local authority send through funding opportunities but they tend to not apply for these – [leader] says they often require match funding that they can’t attain.”

(Friends of River Round, case study narrative)

Promoting the space / running events

All the groups promoted the space to the general public. This was often via social media and links to other local organisations e.g. schools, though some also used the radio and press (Friends of the River Round). This was because of their love for the area and a desire for more people to know about and use it. Some were indignant not to feature on local authority promotional material.

Most groups ran community events. The Friends of Gaskell Park had an annual pop-up farm and Easter egg hunts, whilst the Friends of Norton Park ran, amongst other events, music and scarecrow festivals. Friends of the River Round volunteers had qualified as helmsmen so they could take people out on the canal on a barge.

“I think we’ve got a bit of a reputation now haven’t we? For putting things on in the summer on Saturday, music events things like that, so people will come maybe, bring their own food, get something from the café, it’s up to them what they want to do. Yer.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Chair, focus group)

A couple of the more established groups had stepped back from organising events themselves. The Friends of Norton Park said their main emphasis now was on making the park so nice that other groups wanted to run events there. Keeping the toilets open meant events such as Park Run could operate. The Chair would help small groups with necessary paperwork so it didn’t act as a barrier.

P1: (...) our strategy has always been to make the park that nice that other people want to use the park. Like yesterday, there was that massive event here, we didn’t run that, we just tee’d it up, we greased the wheels, or [P2] did. When people apply

to use the park council, for example, send them a wadge of papers out like that [mimes a big pile], and it puts people off, so, we meet them, we explain things, any..

P2: I fill the forms in for them

P1: Fill the forms in for them. As a result, we end up with loads of events in the park, we don't have to organise. But when we do have to organise one, if we throw volunteers at it, it will run smooth, like Easter egg hunt and hook a duck championship, that's our biggest event.

(Friends of Norton Park, Leaders, focus group)

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, the Friends of Hardy Rec encouraged other groups, e.g. a performance collective, to form so they could use the space.

Lobbying / campaigning

Nearly all the participating groups had made strenuous efforts to influence the local authority, especially the parks team, and their decisions.

Vigorous, confrontational, public campaigns were led by three. The Friends of Norton Park instigated a long-running campaign to keep the public toilets open, including 'sit-ins' wearing marigold gloves, that featured in the local press. Getting five LNRs designated was the focus of "*fierce battles*" between the local authority and the TBCF, who pushed hard for the change in status. Similarly, the Friends of Gaskell Park campaigned vigorously and publicly, via a public petition and press coverage, against the parks team's plan to remove one of the play areas. The last two of these campaigns resulted in the Friends appearing publicly at a full council meeting. Both won their votes and the parks teams' decisions were over-turned. Strong campaigns were also fought over the positioning of play equipment (Friends of Norton Park) and the allocation of grant resources (TBCF).

"We argued and reasoned for quite a long time, we've been banging on about this for best part of three years at least, and then what happened eventually is that we launched a petition, last summer, summer just gone. (...) then 600 signatures went into the council. And then we were invited to present in person, so four of us went to that, as Chair, [name] read out a prepared statement that we'd looked at, and then (...) that hearing came up at the end of [month] and we won."

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, walking interview)

One case study, the Friends of Hardy Rec, also worked to influence local authority plans but in a less public way. They refused, for example, to let the local authority put a huge amount of rubble (from a stadium re-build) in the park, saying it was a “*red-line*” they would not cross. The local authority acquiesced. And, when the river was de-culverted revealing major issues with the sewerage system (years of mismanagement meant wastewater was going directly into the river), rather than going public, they tried to resolve the issues in partnership with the local authority. This approach is discussed more in Chapter 8 ‘building collective responsibility’.

One group, Friends of Wilde Meadows, had attempted to influence the parks teams decisions in regard to green space management. However, in general, they had been unsuccessful, leading to frustration and a feeling of powerlessness.

To summarise, a wide range of diverse activities were undertaken by participating Friends Group. They varied in terms of their level of ambition and emphasis and whilst some were very ‘hands on’ others had a more strategic or management approach, co-ordinating the activities and being part of fundraising bids. Many similarities in terms of activity type emerged. Most groups tackled antisocial behaviour, improved facilities, undertook fundraising, promoted the space and campaigned. Some also undertook maintenance and conservation tasks. The different emphases relate to the interests and skills of the leaders and the context in which they were operating. The asset-based concept of ‘Head, Hands and Heart’ (Hopkins and Rippon, 2015) has resonance here. The groups used their local knowledge and skills, their abilities to do practical tasks and were driven by their interests and passions to improve their much-loved local green spaces. There was a good fit with Figure 2.1 though, in this study, there was greater emphasis on lobbying / campaigning and on tackling anti-social behaviour.

This chapter now moves on to discuss what constitutes success and assesses each group accordingly.

Success

Objective 2 of this study was to identify factors that helped mobilise and sustain Friends Groups (success factors). In order to do this rigorously it was important to understand what success is, especially because it became evident, during analysis, that the success of Friends Groups was not one-dimensional, but multi-faceted, with different aspects to it. A group might, for example, be very successful at improving green space infrastructure, but less successful engaging with the community.

Various aspects of success (six in total) were therefore identified and defined. The success of individual groups, for each aspect, was then assessed (on a scale of 1-5), leading to an overall 'score'. This process, described fully below, meant that potential success factors could be examined based on their presence or not in each group and compared to levels of success. For example, if community cohesion was thought to be a potentially important success factor for groups, this could be compared to levels of success and whether there was a pattern or not ascertained. Looking for patterns is, Mason (2018) says, key to effective qualitative analysis.

It is important to note that the scores, whilst numerical, were used purely as a device for understanding, so patterns could be explored i.e. they are a heuristic tool used for the qualitative analysis. They were not about precisely measuring success in a quantitative manner. This approach is similar to that used by Draper et al. (2010) when assessing levels of community participation. They identified five process indicators of community participation, which researchers then 'scored' programmes against. Their use of spider diagrams to visualise success is also similar to this study – see below. Similarly Baker et al. (2010) identified three success categories for community-based green space organisations and scored groups accordingly.

Identifying and defining the aspects of success

The six aspects of success identified are described below (A-F). These emerged from the case studies but were also informed by literature, in particular that relating to the 'benefits' of Friends Groups or public participation – or conversely key issues (see Chapters 2 and 3). These are not presented in any particular order or weighted in terms of importance, other than to say aspect A features most prominently both in the literature and in this study.

Aspect A: Green space improvements

Much of the Friends Groups literature relates to improvements to the place, or green space itself (Jones, 2002b; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005; Holifield and Williams, 2014; Walker, 2016; Lee, 2018), with the GreenSpace Community Survey (2012) identifying this as the highest priority for groups. Fors et al.'s (2015) review includes improvements to the space as one of three main areas of benefits in the public participation literature. In this study, it was this aspect of success that dominated conversations, and was assumed by participants when asked about their achievements. Improvements to the space itself is therefore identified as a key aspect of success. This covers whether the existence of the Friends Group has led to the green space becoming a better space for people to spend time in. Maintenance, facilities, levels of anti-social behaviour, safety and attractiveness are all incorporated within this.

Aspect B: Community involvement

Membership and community involvement issues feature strongly in the Friends Group literature (Jones, 2002b; GreenSpace Community survey, 2012; Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Parks Action Group, 2019) with many groups struggling to find people to volunteer or take on responsibilities. This study concurred with this (see later), so, being able to involve the community was included as a key aspect of success (B). This covers whether the groups were able, or not, to encourage local people to participate in improving the space by, for example, helping with maintenance tasks, at events or attending meetings.

Benefits for volunteers (aspect C) and leaders (aspect D)

A key area explored in the literature (Townsend, 2006; Husk et al., 2016) is the impact on participants, mainly in terms of benefits experienced. In this study, the experiences of volunteers undertaking tasks compared to leaders, with their greater responsibilities, was felt to be sufficiently different to be included separately. Aspect C therefore covers whether volunteers gained from their participation; socially, mentally, physically or in terms of skills. Aspect D includes these same potential benefits but relates to the leaders, and therefore also incorporates potential pressures from their responsibilities.

Aspect E: Relationship with partners

Friends Groups relationships with their partners, mainly local authorities, is included as the fifth aspect of success. This concurs with Baker et al. (2010) who identified this as one of their key characteristics of success. The Friends Group literature is clear that, whilst a good working relationship with local authorities is key to success, it is often not achieved (Jones, 2002a, Jones, 2002b; GreenSpace Community, 2012; Speller and Ravenscroft, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Parks Action Group, 2019; Whitten, 2019; NFPGS, 2021). This aspect therefore covers whether or not groups were able to build a productive working relationship with the partner(s) most relevant to them. This incorporates narratives relayed during the study relating to working practices (positive and negative), issues and emotions such as frustration, anger or, more positively, friendship and shared endeavour.

Aspect F: Sustainability

The final aspect of success identified is group sustainability. A lack of this is an area of concern for Friends Groups (Holifield and Williams, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Whitten, 2019) and public participation generally (Mattijssen et al., 2017). Including this as an aspect of success therefore encourages focusing on it. This incorporates whether or not the group is operating in a way that ensures it could be sustained or whether it is very reliant on one or two individuals.

Scoring participating groups

Each participating Friends Group was then scored, out of five, for each aspect of success; 5 being high and 1 being low. See Appendix 6.1 for the full scoring table, explaining specific decisions. Table 6.6 shows an example row relating to Aspect A. Scores were based on data collected by the researcher during the visits and interactions described in Chapter 5, and there is therefore an element of subjectivity. They do however, give a sense of which aspects groups had been most successful in. Future studies could use these aspects (or adapted versions of them) to collect data at the time of the visit.

Some aspects were easier to score than others. Green space improvement (Aspect A) was reasonably easy, as it was visible whilst visiting and dominated conversations. Aspects C (volunteer benefits) and F (sustainability) were more difficult, because less time was spent discussing them and, as the main participants were group leaders, these aspects were not always within their perspective. Raven Hill has been excluded as the group did not officially form, and therefore cannot be assessed.

Table 6.6: Green space improvement scores, by Friends Group.

	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	River Round	Gaskell Park (GP)	TBCF	Wilde Meadows
A: Green space improvement scores 5 = transformational 4 = substantial 3 = significant 2 = some change 1 = very limited	Very high (5/5) – transformed in terms of facilities, safety, maintenance. Large bid – successful.	Very high (5/5) – transformed in terms of facilities, safety, maintenance. Raised more than £0.7m	Significant (3/5) – paths and waterways better maintained. Have some funds but small amounts.	Significant (3/5) – café, activities, trails. Maintenance less affected. Small pots of money successfully bid for (e.g. £5k)	High (4/5) – setting up of LNRs, access paths. Part of successful large bid.	Some success but limited (2/5) Better maintained – less litter. Issues reported and dealt with. Some activities. Small bids successful

All scores by group are presented in Table 6.7 and plotted as a spider diagram in Figure 6.7 to visualise the success, of each group, by aspect.

Table 6.7: Scores, by Friends Group, for each aspect of success

	Hardy Rec	Norton Park	River Round	Gaskell Park	TBCF	Wilde Meadows	Total
A: Green Space Improvement	5	5	3	4	4	2	23
B: Community Involvement	5	3	3	3	2	2	18
C: Volunteer Benefits	4	4	5	4	2	1	20
D: Leader Benefits	5	4	4	4	3	2	22
E: LA Relationship	4	2	2	1	1	1	11
F: Sustainability	5	3	3	3	2	1	17
Total	28	21	20	19	14	9	

Figure 6.6: Spider diagram plotting level of success by group (Woodward, 2023)



Levels of success

By group

The group that was the most successful across all aspects, was Friends of Hardy Rec. It had been transformational in terms of green space improvements, encouraged community involvement and benefitted both leaders and volunteers. Uniquely, it scored highly in Aspect E as it had managed to work positively and constructively with the local authority (see Chapter 8).

The Friends of Norton Park had also transformed their green space (Aspect A) and scored highly for volunteer and leader benefits, but less well for its relationship with the local authority (Aspect E) which was very confrontational, and sustainability (Aspect F) as it relied on a small number of individuals. The Friends of River Round scored especially highly for volunteer benefits (Aspect C) as participants, often retired men, had formed new friendships and a clear sense of purpose from their involvement. The Friends of Gaskell Park had high scores across most aspects, except for its relationship with the local authority. TBCF was initially presented as a ‘success story’ and it had made significant improvements to the green space by ensuring they became designated LNRs. However it was less successful in terms

of community involvement, benefitting volunteers and in its relationship with the local authority.

The Friends of Wilde Meadows, the 'developing group, only achieved a score of 1 or 2 for each aspect. Whilst it had made some improvements to the green space, it had struggled to engage with the community and had a troubled relationship with the local authority. Whilst the leader had initially experienced benefits, the burden of struggling to maintain the group had an adverse effect on her.

Please note that all tables about success factors have been organised in order of 'success', as ascertained in Table 6.7 i.e. the group with the highest overall 'score' (or the most successful) is at the far left, and the least successful is at the far right. This is utilised in Chapters 7 & 8 when potential success factors are explored in more detail.

By aspect of success

Green space improvement, leader and volunteer benefits were the three aspects showing the greatest degree of success.

Two groups had transformed the parks in which they operated, over years, from under-utilised, poorly maintained and unsafe spaces to thriving, attractive and loved community spaces, and most other groups had also made substantial improvements. Leader benefits were less often discussed but they showed great pride in their achievements and a clear sense of purpose, though, for some, this was tempered by stress and responsibility (see Chapters 7&8).

Sustainability had reasonably low scores (commonly 3/5) as many groups relied largely on two or three individuals. In the case of Friends of Norton Park the same two people had run the group since 2003; whilst others were involved, they were the key decision makers. The Friends of Hardy Rec had had the same Chair for many years but the group had clear structures and sub-groups, making it more likely another person could take over the role (see Chapter 7).

The aspect with the lowest scores (all except one scored 1 or 2) was the groups' relationships with the local authority. These were often characterised by confrontation and distrust and is discussed later, as a key theme in Chapter 8.

To summarise, in order to rigorously ascertain success factors, six aspects of success were identified and defined, with groups assigned a score for each. This enabled the groups to be

'ranked' according to their level of success. Green space improvement was where most groups had succeeded, followed by benefits to leaders and volunteers. There had been less success in building a positive relationship with the local authority and sustainability. Whilst one group had been successful across all aspects, others tended to have succeeded more in some areas, than others.

This chapter has described the participating groups and the main activities they undertook. It has then assessed levels of success. This serves as the foundation for the two following results chapters.

Chapter 7: Place, People and Process Results

This chapter presents results for three of the four domains: Place, People and Process.

These higher-level concepts were identified during analysis, as described in Chapter 5. For each domain a description is given of its main features, before identifying which of these emerge as explanatory success factors i.e., their presence patterns with success. The fourth domain, Power, is explained in Chapter 8.

The Place Domain

This section describes the parks and green spaces in which the participating Friends Groups operated, to provide context. Three ‘types’ of spaces were identified.

“Parks with a capital P”

Three case studies operated within traditional formal parks (Hardy Rec, Norton Park and Gaskell Park), described by one participant as *“Parks with a Capital P”*. They covered large areas (48, 70 and 56 acres respectively) and had been planned as part of the urban area. All had clear boundaries separating them from surrounding houses or roads, often consisting of metal railings punctuated by gates, some grandiose, others more functional. Nearby housing faced onto these parks, overlooking the interior. Inside, there were large areas of mown grass, formal trees (positioned individually or in boundaried woodland), flower beds and tarmac paths leading around the interior. Straight lines often dominated.

Figure 7.1: Friends of Norton Park photos (Woodward, 2018)



The oldest of these parks was created in the 1850s, the others in the 1930s and 40s, and their histories were important to local people. Participants would recount key past events; in one, during WW2 a bomb had landed on a public shelter in the park killing many people, in another, a local resident had published a detailed history of the park, its development, and significant events.

These three traditional parks shared many common features. All had play-areas and skate-parks, sporting facilities of various kinds (tennis courts, football pitches, bowling greens), ponds, fitness / activity trails and information boards. Less common features included a sculpture trail and a performance space. Two had water features that previously people could interact with (a boating lake and a paddling pool) but were now ornamental or for wildlife.

All had cafes, two of which the Friends Group were closely involved in. In Hardy Rec the café was inside a newly built sustainable community 'hub' run as a co-operative (with the Friends as Chair). In Gaskell Park the café was run by the Friends Group, inside a previously derelict storeroom transferred into their ownership by the local authority. A variety of activities took place inside, ranging from cookery and coding classes to ballet, yoga and hula hooping (Hardy Rec) to family crafting and bird-box making (Gaskell Park). Both provided a warm, welcoming, safe space for visitors, whilst also encouraging informal communication between people looking after the park (see later, 'process domain'). In the third park of this type, a café existed, but it was not operated by the Friends and was closed, undergoing renovations, during the visit.

Public toilets were available in all three of these parks. In one (Norton Park) the Friends Group had had a long running battle with the local authority to keep them open (see Chapter 6). They believed toilets were essential *"you can't have a park like this and not have any toilets"* (Chair, focus group). This was because people tended to visit for a long time, as a day-out, and many visitors had disabilities, special needs or were older. Having toilets was also essential for events; Park Run for example, insisted on them for authorisation as a venue. In Gaskell Park, the toilet was within the café run by the Friends Group and, having this, meant the park was eligible for a Green Flag Award. This was a key performance indicator for the local authority and the Friends felt they were not sufficiently appreciative of their role in helping them achieve this award – see Chapter 8, 'lack of appreciation'.

Maintenance levels for the parks varied slightly. Two were very well maintained with neat grass and flower beds, recently painted equipment and smooth paths. The third appeared slightly less well cared for, with an “*air of scruffiness*”.

“It was clearly once a prestigious park with grand features such as a wide stone boulevard, ornate drinking fountains, a statue of Sir [name] and a listed bridge. Now though there is a feeling of faded grandeur – the features are dirty / over-grown, the play parks are tatty, the pavements rough, the gates need painting and the planting is limited (though it is January!) The trees are large and mature and look well cared for and there is a pond with swans on.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, case study narrative)

There were very few signs of vandalism or antisocial behaviour in all of these parks. In two there was some graffiti and litter, but this was quite small-scale, whilst Norton Park was pristine, with no evidence of any negative behaviour. The Friends Groups attributed this to their efforts, and their presence over the years. Local authority park managers concurred with this (see Chapter 8) saying that when the community took ownership of spaces, vandalism reduced.

This study was not designed to measure usage. However, these three traditional parks appeared well-used. During visits people were there walking, often with dogs or children, jogging, picnicking or simply sitting on a bench. A group of corporate volunteers was present in one, whilst in the other two, activity centred around the café, with people popping in to eat and chat.

All three parks felt welcoming and safe during the visit, despite some apprehension beforehand. In my field-notes, I attributed this to the presence of other people there, participating in everyday activities, and knowing that the café or hub, manned by volunteers, was nearby. Being well maintained also led to a feeling of safety.

“I felt slightly nervous walking there – my only knowledge of the area / the park was that it was next to the [name] Estate, made notorious by the riots in the [decade]. I was wondering about the wisdom of walking into the park on my own! However, it was fine – the park felt welcoming and there were enough people about to feel safe.”

(Friends of Hardy Rec, fieldnotes)

“Abandoned yet beautiful”

Three cases studies (covering two spaces, as two were linked covering the same geographic area – see Chapter 6) were informal green spaces in urban areas. Historically, they were spaces that had been left undeveloped as housing was built around them. Rather than being a defined shape therefore, they filled whatever space had been left. Nearby housing tended to face away from these spaces, making them feel hidden, even hard to find. In both spaces, entrances were often poorly signposted and unobvious, sometimes necessitating finding a narrow gate behind or between houses.

These green spaces felt natural, wild and unplanned. Shrubbery, sometimes dense and difficult to pass through, featured prominently. There were many trees but, in contrast to the traditional formal parks, these were growing haphazardly, without defined borders. Open areas were un-mown, in Wilde Meadows in the form of wildflower meadows, in Raven Hill thistles dominated.

“It is a wild space with tangles of trees, shrubs and, in any open areas, long grass and thistles. A little stream, that has become blocked, flows through it – at the bottom is a boggy section that was once a pond. Lots of little paths meander about the space, many are overgrown with vegetation. The bottom part of the space – that I visit most often – feels quite scrappy – you have to duck to get between sections and you can’t see far because of the vegetation. There are a couple of open areas (grass and thistles), that are often the focus of the activity.”

(Raven Hill, case study narrative)

Infrastructure was limited. Well maintained paths and some information boards existed in Wilde Meadows but, other than that, there were no facilities. In Raven Hill signs of previous infrastructure, old information boards and posts, existed but these were now hidden by vegetation. Paths were overgrown. During my time visiting the spaces, both developed features to appeal more to people. A nature trail was developed in Wilde Meadows, and in Raven Hill, new gates and improved signage were installed by YCC to make it more welcoming, and an open seated area with raised beds created for socialising.

Antisocial behaviour was a significant issue in both informal green spaces. Fly-tipping, large amounts of litter, fires (of fly-tipping and natural features) plus motor / quad bikes all featured prominently, causing distress and upset to the Friends Groups (see Chapter 6).

The spaces did not appear well-used. During visits, the occasional dog-walker would be seen but few other people. When people did use the spaces, there were concerns as to their intentions, with their presence, at times, feeling negative or threatening.

“He’s a young adult. I mean, erm he’s (pause) if you met him on a dark street you’d be like ‘oh, a bit wary’ with his giant dog you know.”

(Raven Hill, YCC staff member, interview)

Feeling unsafe emerged as a theme in both spaces. Advocates of the spaces (the leader of Friends of Wilde Meadow and the YCC staff member) emphasised that they personally felt safe there, but it affected other potential visitors and residents – see next section.

Despite these issues, both spaces had a beauty and a tranquillity about them, that felt at odds with the urban surroundings. One participant, a long-term resident of the area near Wilde Meadows called the space *“abandoned, yet beautiful”*. My field-notes reinforce this.

“As we walked North-West towards the tower-blocks the area became quieter – there was hardly anyone else there - and beautiful. The meadows were covered in tall grass and flowers and hedges full of cow-parsley and flowering trees were dotted about. Whilst you could see the tower blocks and hear the traffic you felt quite far away from it and surrounded by nature. (...) There are very few ‘structures’ other than well-maintained paths and gates so it feels more like being in fields, rather than being in a park. All in all, it feels slightly magical going from the dirt and noise of the A[road number] into ancient meadowland, surrounded by flowers.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, fieldnotes)

Figure 7.2 Friends of Wilde Meadows photo (Woodward, 2018)



Waterways

One case study, the Friends of the River Round, was based around a long stretch of river and canal, close to a city centre. The section visited was in an industrial area of the city, with many small workshops and garages. The river ran behind the back of these, close to a busy road, meaning traffic noise was ever present. Alongside the river was a footpath / cycleway and a band of vegetation, sometimes narrow, but in other places widening out into an open area. Decorative arches and information boards welcome people and made it appear cared for. Fly-tipping, litter and graffiti were all present. Despite the industrial setting, the noise and the antisocial behaviour, the space did have a beauty and a naturalness about it.

“Trees line the banks and there were patches of greenery at the side – volunteers told me it is beautiful in the Spring and Summer with kingfishes and herons having been seen.”

(Friends of the River Round, case study narrative)

The space appeared well used. When I visited it was bitterly cold but, despite this, people were walking or jogging along the paths.

This space has both natural-feeling elements, such as the river and the un-tamed banks, and man-made ones, in the form of the structured paths, the benches and the decorative arches. In terms of formality, it sits between the traditional parks, and the informal green spaces.

To summarise, three types of space feature in the case studies. One ‘type’ is a traditional, formal park, planned as part of a residential area, with historical connections. Houses overlook these structured spaces, with established features such as ponds and formal planting. Many facilities for people exist, including cafes, toilets and leisure activities. The second ‘type’ is an informal urban green space. Unplanned, and with many local people unaware of them, these spaces appear far more ‘natural’ with shrubs, plants and trees taking over the space. Antisocial behaviour is a particular issue in these spaces. Few facilities for people exist. The third ‘type’ is a blue urban space. There are clear signs of human-made structures, yet also a degree of natural-ness.

Success Factors

Factors, relating to place, that help explain Friends Groups levels of success are now examined. Using the analysis process described in Chapter 6, two factors were identified as explanatory, namely the 'type of space' and its 'wildness'. Anti-social behaviour emerged as a barrier to success, but one that successful groups had managed to overcome.

See Table 7.1 below where, as mentioned previously, Friends Groups are arranged in order of success, from left to right. The rows represent the potential success factors explored.

Where a pattern emerges, between the more and less successful groups, this is categorised as an explanatory success factor i.e., it helps explain success, and is shaded dark grey. If no pattern emerges i.e., there seems to be no difference between more or less successful groups, this is dismissed as an explanatory success factor in this study and is not shaded.

Table 7.1: Place Domain: Potential Success Factors

	Level of Success From higher (left hand end) to lower (right hand end)						
	Friends of Hardy Rec	Friends of Norton Park	Friends of the River Round	Friends of Gaskell Park	TBCF	Friends of Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Type of space	Traditional Urban Park	Traditional Urban Park	Canal and Riverside	Traditional Urban Park	Urban Green Space	Urban Green Space	Urban Green Space
Wildness of space	Largely tamed. Some wild spaces but in demarked areas.	Very tamed / manicured / ordered. Some limited wild spaces but in demarked places.	River / canal give order but wildness at the edges.	Mixture of tamed spaces and wilder, less ordered areas.	Wild – some order in terms of paths.	Wild – some order in terms of paths.	Very wild and untamed. Lacks order.
Antisocial behaviour	Very high before FG involvement, now low	Very high before FG involvement, now very low / non-existent	Still high but FG making attempts to reduce	Some, but fairly limited.	Quite high – fly-tipping, vandalism, littering	Quite high – fly-tipping, vandalism, littering	Very high – fly-tipping, vandalism, fires, quad bikes
Community cohesion / neighbourliness	Uncertain. Riots were followed by CE efforts.	Mixed – “good” and “bad” estates.	Low – ex industrial area. Limited community sense.	Low – fragmented, troubled community. But with some more cohesive areas.	Unknown but possibly limited.	Limited community action / togetherness.	Low community cohesion – fragmented and troubled.
Infrastructure (partly outcome of FG)	Now, yes – hub, toilets, playground. But at FG start, very limited.	Now yes – café, toilets, playgrounds, fitness equipment and more. But less at FG start.	None, other than paths	Now yes – café, toilets, playgrounds, bowling greens, courts and more. But less at FG start.	None, other than paths	None, other than paths	None, even lacks paths

Type of space

As Table 7.1 demonstrates, Friends Groups situated in more traditional urban parks tended to be more successful than those situated in informal green spaces. One explanation for this, is that there is low awareness of the existence of these informal spaces. Two participants, based in Wilde Meadows, said many local people were unaware of the space, despite living in close proximity. As noted earlier, housing tends to face away from these spaces, and signposts and access points are limited, unlike in traditional formal parks, where the housing over-looks the parks and formal gate-ways direct people in. Overall, there is a lack of physical interaction between where people live and these green spaces, affecting both Wilde Meadows and Raven Hill.

“Diane, and the Arts Group, both felt that many people didn’t know the space was there – despite being so close to it, they were unaware of it. This was partly, because the housing (and other buildings) tend to face away from the space – unlike in more formal Parks. In the new estate you have to find a footpath that goes out the back of the houses to reach the Fields (which is not signposted). See google maps image below – the new housing estate is on the right. You can see how the houses don’t really interact with the Fields at all.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

Figure 7.3: Friends of Wilde Meadows, Google Earth image (Map Data, 2022 © Google)



In addition, there is a strong emotional connection between local people and the traditional formal parks, with participants recounting stories about the spaces – historical events or their memories of it. This chimes with the idea of social memories from civic ecology, described in

Chapter 3. This was less evident in informal green space case studies, suggesting a lack of connection between the local people and these spaces.

Another explanation, given by both informal green space groups, is that people do not know how to interact with these types of spaces as they lack focal points or obvious activities. This is unlike traditional parks that have paths leading people around the space, and familiar features that people know how to engage with.

“I think that people don’t value it as much because it’s not manicured and maybe it doesn’t have the sort of fixed play equipment. It’s not formalised in that way as to how it’s playable, how it’s engageable, or how you might want to um engage with it. I think that people are confused about that. Whereas a park is nice and straightforward, you can go for a walk on the nice path and it takes you around the park. Or you can go to the play area and that’s what you do there. And I think it’s a sort of lack of understanding about because it’s informal.”

(Raven Hill, YCC staff member, interview)

Both these groups were introducing features to encourage people to engage with the spaces, for example, more welcoming entrances, benches, herb beds and nature trails. An Arts Group based near Wilde Meadows were hoping to install creative features that would encourage local people in to explore.

The wildness of the space

Another factor that appears to affect the success of the Friends Groups is how wild they are. Those situated in wilder, more natural, spaces tended to be less successful than those in more tamed spaces.

Wild, ‘natural’ spaces can be perceived as being uncared for. One participant, a YCC employee from the Wilde Meadows case study, said local people had told him some woods needed sorting out as they were “a mess” with “stuff fallen down” and “dead trees”. His perception however was different, seeing a natural area, beneficial to wildlife. By doing some maintenance work, whilst also explaining to people the importance of dead wood for nature, he believed this would make it look more cared for and people would be more likely to appreciate it.

The dislike or fear of wild, untamed spaces was a strong theme in the Raven Hill case study. One local resident, interviewed for the case study, expressed a number of desires for the

space, all centred around taming the wildness. This was strongly associated with feelings of safety for her family. She wanted trees felled, to reduce the fire-risk. Local youths, she said, could set fire to them and, because of how dense they were, it would spread rapidly. She also wanted the grass-cut so her children could play near the house, where she could see them, thus not getting into trouble. Other requests included the bushes being trimmed so men could not “*lurk in them*” and a light installed so it was safer to walk across.

“Ideally, I’d love one big light out there but they’re never going to get funds for that (...) Just that’s more for safety for older ones walking down on a night. There’s no light out there whatsoever.”

(Raven Hill, local resident, interview)

She was aware that some of these measures were at odds with the YCC’s vision for the space and would impact on nature. However she believed there was a balance to be made:

“I really hope that we get a regular, like you know just twice a year, grass-cutter. You know I understand that it’s for wildlife and stuff, but kids need a place to play and it’s massive. All that could still be buttercups and whatever’s over there with all animals and stuff, but out here I think needs and you know like where it walks round there, where the paths are I think it you know that needs cutting regularly as well.”

One YCC employee attributed (at least in part) this dislike, or fear of wildness, to a disconnection from nature. In a magazine article about the project, she said, “*The natural environment can feel an alien place if you are unsure, uncomfortable, cannot name anything and don’t know what to do.*” During an interview she expressed a belief that this was partly cultural. In certain cultures (for example, in Raven Hill), nature is seen as ‘dangerous’. This belief, she felt, emanated from a historical aspiration to move away from nature and create a more sterile, tidy environment. More recently, some of society had moved on from this belief and were valuing nature, and its inherent untidiness, more. Whilst not stated explicitly, there were hints that this could be related to social class. Another employee contrasted the negative attitude to nature amongst Raven Hill residents, with another project in a more middle-class area, where people were more aware of the importance of nature and therefore more willing to accept untidiness.

Despite these differing attitudes, the YCC responded to residents’ concerns by, for example, organising regular grass cutting and trimming vegetation, so the space felt more open, tamed, and therefore more appealing. However, the YCC employee, had a strong desire to

teach people to appreciate nature more and be less afraid of wild spaces *“I want to flip that on its head. That’s my whole kind of passion” (Raven Hill, YCC staff member, interview).*

In the more successful Friends Groups, for example, in Norton Park, great efforts had been made to tame the spaces and reduce the wildness (see Chapter 6). Where wildness was allowed to exist, it was contained within demarcated areas. Again, this was strongly associated with feeling safe. High hedges, dense trees, and low-hanging branches were seen as places for people to hide in, or for disruptive activities to take place.

“Every aspect of Norton Park’s new arrangement has been carefully thought out so as to minimise it’s liability, from the placement of new features to the removal of hedgerows, the whole park has been transformed into a place of enjoyment and security for all to enjoy”.

(Friends of Norton Park, local history book – not referenced for anonymity)

These findings show that there appears to be a dislike, or fear, of wilder spaces, amongst some people making the task of Friends Groups in these informal green spaces more challenging. It is uncertain whether this is due directly to the wildness / the nature itself, or to what the wildness hides i.e., it is a space where criminality could occur, thus making people feel physically unsafe. It is probable that both issues are relevant and overlap. In neighbourhoods where people generally feel unsafe, such as Raven Hill – see quote below, wilder spaces, where criminality could occur unseen, elicits higher concern than in safer neighbourhoods. This issue of safety is discussed more in the next section.

“There appears to be a slight element of ‘lawlessness’ or being at the edge of society here – groups of teenagers would pass by and everyone would go quiet, or [local resident] would talk about a family who are very “well-connected” with “fancy cars” who “you wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of”. Another local woman asked the YCC to trim the bushes in the green space, so men couldn’t hide there. More comically, at one point there was a horse loose in the area that was eating people’s plants from their back-yards.”

(Raven Hill, case study narrative)

Antisocial behaviour

Fly-tipping, littering and vandalism is a third theme relating to place, emerging in nearly all the case studies. As can be seen in Table 7.1, the most successful groups had managed to

tackle antisocial behaviours and these were now viewed as mainly historical concerns. The Chair of Friends of Hardy Rec, reflecting on when they started out, 17 years before said:

“And there was a parent toddler group, you know, sort of embattled in the middle of the park in a semi-derelict building that this current one has replaced.”

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

And this quote from a local history book, describes the state of Norton Park in the 1990s, before the Friends Group started working there:

“The park that we knew and loved so well was to enter a period of doom and gloom. More than that, it was to become a derelict and neglected place that no-one of sane mind would have been proud of, let alone visit”

(Friends of Norton Park, local history book – not referenced for anonymity)

The less successful groups, at the time of the study, were still struggling to tackle antisocial behaviour and this impacted negatively on their ability to engage with local residents. In Raven Hill, the YCC and partners, had made great efforts to remove fly-tipping and litter. When places are in such a poor state, one employee said, it can be overwhelming for residents to tackle on their own *“it’s a mountain to climb.”* The improvements had prompted positive responses from local residents and increased their engagement with the space. One woman, speaking to the YCC project lead, described how previously the high levels of litter had made her embarrassed of the space and reluctant to use it. Recent improvements had made her more willing to use, and help improve, it.

“There was another lady who came past who said the litter has improved so much and ‘now when I bring my kids on, I’m not like feeling really like embarrassed or ashamed of the space and having to apologise to my kids about how horrible and messy it is. The litter’s massively improved and I feel like I can use it more and .. we just really appreciate what you’ve been doing.’ And they’ve joined in on some litter picks now and again.”

(Raven Hill, YCC staff member, interview)

Another woman spoke similarly, directly to me, about how the improvements had increased her engagement with the space:

“On one of my visits, a woman and small child came over to speak to Adam and I. She thanked the YCC for clearing away the fly-tipping / litter, saying how much better

the space is now. Whilst ten years ago it hadn't been too bad it had got "really terrible". She has an allotment so regularly walks across it - the litter and fly-tipping had made her feel unsafe and she didn't want to walk there."

(Raven Hill, fieldnotes)

Antisocial behaviour therefore acts as a barrier to people using or enjoying the space, and to engaging with it at all. Having the ability to tackle it, leads to people feeling that the place is cared for and safer, reduces their feelings of shame and increases their likelihood of engaging with the space.

Two potential success factors, within the Place domain, were explored but found to not be explanatory. One was the degree of community cohesion / neighbourliness locally. Many of the places in the case-studies were said to lack neighbourliness and there were tensions within the community but this was not restricted to the less successful groups. Gaskell Park, for example, was a successful Friends Group, yet the local area was described as being riven by problematic issues and tensions between communities. The amount of facilities within the green spaces was also explored as a potential success factor. Yet, again, no clear pattern emerged. Many of the successful Friends Groups were based within parks that, when their involvement started, lacked quality facilities or infrastructure. One example of this is the Friends of Hardy Rec where many of the facilities had disappeared or were in an extremely poor state of repair at the start of their involvement. Good facilities therefore appear to be an outcome of a successful Friends Group, not a predictor.

To summarise therefore, success factors for Friends Groups within the Place domain include the type of space and the degree of wildness. Traditional urban parks that have been 'tamed' tended to have more successful groups. Antisocial behaviour served as a barrier to engagement but successful groups had managed to tackle this. What appears to pull these themes together is a preference for order and control. Where people could understand how to interact with the space, perceive it as 'tame' and with antisocial behaviour under control, they were more likely to want to engage with it. This is discussed more in Chapter 9.

The People Domain

This section focuses on the people involved in instigating and running the Friends Groups. The main emphasis is on the groups' leaders; their characteristics, motivations, skills / capabilities, and personality traits. Leader is used as a broad term to incorporate individuals involved in practically running the groups. It is not an official term and does not relate to a

specific role. This was partly because there was little uniformity across groups in relations to roles or titles; group leaders were often the official Chairs, but not always. For example, the key individual (or leader in this document) in the Friends of the River Round had no official title, despite setting up the group and running all the work-days, whilst the Chair had far less active involvement. Please note that the involvement of other individuals with the groups are discussed more in the Process domain, later in this chapter.

As before, the key features of this domain are described first, before moving on to identify explanatory success factors.

Group Leaders – a description

Key characteristics of the leaders can be seen in Appendix 7.1, with key attributes now discussed.

Demographics

Most leaders started their involvement in their 50s or 60s and were retired from paid work. Some had retired early whilst still in good health. Early retirees included the leaders of the Friends of River Round and Norton Park, the Gaskell Park café manager and TBCF.

“I retired early I was 54 when I retired and I actually did voluntary work immediately from then on. (...) So I just fancied breaking out of the local authority bureaucracy and being able to be much more my own boss to be able to make things happen quicker.”

(TBCF, ex-Chair, interview)

Only two participants became group leaders when younger. One was the Chair of the Friends of Hardy Rec, who took on the role in his 40s whilst unemployed, though busy with an absorbing national campaign. The other was the Chair of the Friends of Gaskell Park, who took on the role whilst in her 30s, with a young child. In Raven Hill the person identified as a potential leader was in her 40s with children still living at home but, as discussed earlier she decided not to take on the role. Again, as mentioned before (see Table 6.4) leaders' gender varied; some groups had mainly male leaders, some mainly female and one was more mixed.

Jobs / Careers

Most leaders had had professional well-respected careers. These included Police Officers, a tele-coms engineer / site manager, teachers, a charity CEO plus a planner and a senior level regeneration expert from a local authority. Only a few had not had professional careers; the Chair of the Friends of Hardy Rec was unemployed, though a well-known community activist, when he became involved, the Chair of Friends of Wilde Meadows, had worked at a library, whilst the potential lead of Raven Hill was a stay-at-home parent. Many had had 'public sector' type careers.

Some leaders were aware that their demographics did not reflect the local community. As mentioned in Chapter 6, there were no participants from ethnic minority groups and younger people also tended not to be involved. Two groups had tried to involve younger people in other ways, to compensate for their lack of involvement in committees. The Friends of Gaskell Park had asked for suggestions from young people and worked hard to implement these e.g. trying to get additional sports equipment. The Chair of Friends of Hardy Rec said most people attending meetings tended to be white, female and older, potentially because younger people lacked the time to dedicate to a group. They therefore encouraged younger people to set up sub-groups based on their interests e.g. BMXing. Reasons for the lack of ethnic diversity were discussed with the Gaskell Park Vice-Chair. Based on her experience as a CEO of a local community hub with many ethnic minority volunteers, she felt it might relate more to class than ethnicity. Being in a Friends Group was quite political, she said, and, as you end up in conflict with the local authority quite a lot, it requires confidence, effort and energy.

Community roles

Being embedded within the local community was a common theme amongst group leaders. Leaders were categorised into 'Insiders' (five groups), indicating they operated from within the community, or 'Outsiders' (one group) (see Appendix 7.1). This was based on whether they lived in the neighbourhood (now or previously) and their other community roles.

Many 'Insider' leaders lived locally (Friends of Hardy Rec, Gaskell Park, Wilde Meadows and Raven Hill). Some even lived in houses overlooking the green space, with a couple saying they visited every day (Friends of Wilde Meadows and Gaskell Park). One exception was the Friends of Norton Park leaders, who lived a few miles away. However, they had long-standing connections with the space, having visited regularly as a child, plus the group's

Secretary lived in a house over-looking the park and acted as their 'eyes and ears'. Having other community / voluntary roles was common amongst Insider leaders. This included being Chair of a Residents' Association, members of a local church, a volunteer for the Riding Disabled Association and for a charity that takes people with disabilities out on a barge. The Chair of the Friends of Wilde Meadows had many community roles, including being a trustee of a local community hub, leader of a local walking group and standing (unsuccessfully) to be a local councillor. She was described as a *"pillar of the Community almost, because she knows so many people"* by a partner.

The TBCF leaders were 'Outsiders', living some distance away from the green space and, initially, with limited connections to the people living there. Their interest was related to their background in planning, recognising the unique qualities of the space (an undeveloped green 'band' running from one end of the city to the other), and its importance strategically to the city.

"Michael's motivation for involvement is difficult to pin down. It seems to be more about his appreciation of the space from a planning point of view. At no point does he mention its beauty or his feelings for the place or the people. It feels quite an intellectual and detached motive. He comes across as someone viewing the area from the outside".

(TBCF, case study narrative)

They also wanted to explore whether local communities could be encouraged to engage with the planning process.

"I thought that it would be an interesting exercise to see if we could actually raise the level of engagement with sort of more traditional working-class communities"

(TBCF, ex-Leader, interview)

The Friends of the River Round leader was not categorised as an Insider or an Outsider, because the group covered a large area. His connection to the space was his love of water and waterways (see next section).

Motivations

Three 'types' of motivations for becoming a Friends Group leader emerged: altruism, personal fulfilment, and love of the space. These often overlapped, with most motivated by at least two.

A desire to improve the area for others, for the public good was the first type. This altruistic motive was associated with a strong value system and a belief that everyone, wherever they lived, deserved access to quality green space. This was an important motivator for the Chair of Hardy Rec, the Gaskell Park leaders, the Chair of the Friends of Wilde Meadows and TBCF leaders. This links, at least partially, to having had jobs in the public sector – two of the Gaskell Park leaders, for example worked in the public sector, one as a teacher (now retired) and one as a leader of a voluntary sector organisation (see quote below).

(Interviewer asks why participant chose to get involved).

P1: (...) I've known the park for a long time and um, I used to live in [a nearby affluent area] before I lived here, well lived near here, and erm, it just infuriated me that we had like [affluent area's park] that was so beautiful and you come here and, you know, I'm very passionate about social justice and I just believed that the toughest places should have the highest quality things. But unfortunately what happens is that in places like this there aren't people who you know, have got the energy to stand up and, you know, shout about people's rights and um, so. So I've known the park for years and was really unhappy about the play equipment in it, in particular, so, you know, my background here is, you know, we're a children's centre, or we were a children's centre and so, you know, I was very into children's play. And the play equipment in the park was just appalling and so, for quite a lot of years, I had this, you know, thought in my mind that I wanted to do something about improving the play equipment in Gaskell Park. So that's my main focus really. And, I'm kind of feeling like that's actually going to happen, so that's brilliant.

(Friends of Gaskell Park, leader, interview)

A second type of motivation was personal fulfilment. This tended to be associated with taking an active decision to become involved (as opposed to becoming involved via circumstances, as happened for some). Examples include the Friends of the River Round and the TBCF. The leader of the former chose to volunteer after retirement as a way of replacing the social contact he had had at work. He had actively looked for volunteering opportunities associated with water, first applying to be a volunteer lock-keeper before being referred onto the River Round.

"I'd just retired and er, I say I was, I wanted to replace like the social contact, you know, like I had at work".

(Friends of the River Round, leader, interview)

Similarly, the TBCF leaders both wanted to remain active after early retirement, so chose to set up the group (see earlier quote in 'demographics').

For some, personal fulfilment emerged as a benefit from being involved. The Friends of Norton Park leaders said they would have been bored without their involvement in the group, but it was not their initial motivation for volunteering.

"it gives us something to do, you know, if I haven't got anything on my mind to be thinking about, I don't know, It's just loose end."

(Friends of Norton Park, Chair, focus group)

The third type of motivation was love for the space. This was particularly true for the leaders of the Friends of Wilde Meadows, Friends of the River Round, Friends of Gaskell Park and Friends of Norton Park. All had strong emotional connections to the space and wanted to rescue it.

"Diane is deeply attached to the Fields (or Meadows). She started walking there with her son when he was a child. She now walks there daily, taking photographs of interesting plants or animals, and feeding the birds. When something gets damaged (e.g. the hedges flayed or flowers mown) she is very emotional, becoming close to tears on a number of occasions".

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

"Carol's connection with the park is long-standing. As a child she lived close by and used to come and visit with her family. She was saddened to see it go downhill and this is part of her motivation for her involvement "as I kid I lived about 3 miles away and it were like a full day out for us, you know, coming here, and to see how it had gone downhill, I thought well you know, this is an opportunity to put something back in type of thing, so that's why I got involved".

(Friends of Norton Park, case study narrative, with focus group insert)

One exception was the potential leader for the Raven Hill Friends Group. Her motivation for wanting to improve the green space, was a practical one, she wanted a safe place for her

children to play, close to her house. She did not display evidence of a desire for personal fulfilment, altruism or love for the space.

Personal qualities

The leaders displayed a wide range of personal qualities, as described below. As I spent time with them, I came to believe that they were remarkable and impressive people.

Levels of commitment to the spaces were extremely high. Many leaders had spent years striving to improve the space that they loved. The Leaders of the Friends of Norton Park, for example, had spent 15 years working full-time to improve the park for others.

“It’s a full-time job [long pause] Um. But I think it’s been a good impact, hasn’t it cause it [pause] we feel good about it, don’t we? [slight laugh]. Well, I certainly do, it’s an achievement”

(Friends of Norton Park, Chair, focus group)

Similarly, the Friends of the River Round leader displayed impressive dedication and commitment, having led and organised work parties every week. Upon discovering some people could not come during the working week, he set up an additional, regular, weekend group. One of the key Gaskell Park Friends, a retired teacher, managed the café, doing all the cooking and baking herself and running it every Saturday. As she mainly baked from home, she did a qualification to get a hygiene certificate for her kitchen; this was not strictly necessary but she wanted to do things “properly”. The Vice-Chair of the group emphasised her high level of dedication.

“I mean the commitment that someone like Emma gives, you know, is incredible I think. Um, you know, for like 2 and a bit years she’s been baking every week. And, you know, essentially runs the café, er, from 10 till 2 every Saturday, and it’s only been closed like 3 or 4 Saturdays in that whole period.

(Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

Many were passionate advocates for their green spaces. During visits, their pride in the space would be clearly evident as they showed all the changes and improvements they had made.

“They take great pride in what they have achieved mentioning, for example, being the only group in [their city] to receive the Queen’s award for voluntary service and going

to Buckingham Palace to receive it. Robert says they now get many visitors a year “in here and it’s nice to have an impact, a nice impact on 400,000 people”. When I met Robert his pride in the transformation of the park is tangible. After my visit he emails me photos of before and after.”

(Friends of Norton Park, case study narrative)

All were passionate about encouraging more people to use and enjoy the space.

“I wish I could find a way to encourage more families to enjoy it”.

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, email interview)

The leaders had high levels of energy, creativity and ambition and were full of ideas for the spaces. The Gaskell Park leaders, for example, ran many different activities but also had ambitious future plans to transform a derelict part of the park into a nature area with a pond, and restoring some heritage features. The Friends of Norton Park continually came up with new ideas, as illustrated in the excerpt below, from a conversation between a key Friend and the two leaders during a focus group.

Friend: The things that we do, I mean, it has got ridiculous (all laughing)

Chair: the thing is, you think you’ve done everything and then another idea pops up and we set off on something else, don’t we?

Friend: It’s now, it’s scarecrows now, isn’t it?

Chair: For events yer

Friend: I mean we’d not done scarecrows had we, and then somebody did scarecrows

Chair: It were him [Co-Leader] when he were in hospital!

Co-Leader: Yer, when I was in hospital

Friend: We thought we knew where we were (...) (laughing). And now we’ve got a scarecrow event!

Co-Leader: It’s amazing what you think of when you are laid in hospital with nothing else to do (laughing and agreeing)

They also showed high levels of ingenuity; if challenges arose, they would think of creative ways around them. The leader of the Friends of Norton Park, for example, when faced with

night-time anti-social behaviour, arranged for a local angling club to fish in the park at night, thus deterring more negative influences. They described being a bit “cheeky” when raising funds; for example, writing to the company who had installed the lake edging many years before, asking if they would refresh it as part of their anniversary celebrations (the company agreed, though the work was never completed – see later for reasons why). The Friends of Gaskell Park, when faced with budget limitations, discovered a historical trust fund they could use to maintain a new play-park. On a smaller scale, the Chair of Wilde Meadows, when faced with a delivery of 400 ‘whips’ (young trees) and nowhere to put them, stored them on her flat balcony.

High levels of courage were demonstrated. At times this was physical bravery, for example standing up to people behaving anti-socially (as many did) or, even rescuing a man who had fallen through the ice of a frozen lake (as the Friends of Norton Park leaders did). The Chair of the Friends of Wilde Meadows, an older woman with mobility issues, walked on her own in the, often deserted, green space, despite feeling intimidated at times.

Most demonstrated moral courage, trying to behave ethically and stand up for what they felt was right. At times, this put them in conflict with others, most often the local authority. As described in Chapter 6, many leaders had fought campaigns against the local authority – including TBCF, Gaskell Park and Norton Park. The TBCF leader felt this was a key role for Friends Groups as most other organisations were dependent financially on the local authority, so were unwilling to stand up to them. One example of this is that, as part of a National Lottery award, two people were employed to work in the green space. The TBCF felt the parks team were trying to use them elsewhere so he fought hard to keep them focused on this particular green space. He thought the other organisation involved was too reliant financially on the local authority to remonstrate with them.

“we played an important role in actually, as I say, I put it very bluntly being a constant, (...) they were aware that I would be on their backs if this kind of direction of work strayed beyond what was reasonable.”

(TBCF, leader, interview)

Occasionally leaders had had to stand up to their own community. The Chair of Hardy Rec, for example, refused to endorse a public campaign against the local authority regarding sewage going into the river. Whilst he acknowledged it was a significant issue that needed addressing, he also recognised it was complex and something they had to work on, with the local authority, as partners. Similarly, the Friends of Norton Park stood up for the local authority when residents complained about tree-felling, saying it was the right thing to do.

“We came up with a plan, with the local neighbourhood manager here, and I said ‘look, if there’s any complaints I’ll deal with it.’ And we had two complaints, so I went to visit them both and they said ‘oh these trees, council taking trees down, they’ve done it on town moor, and the golf course and now they’re doing it on Norton Park’, I said ‘look, we’re Friends of Norton Park, we asked the Council and we organised them to take these trees down’ so they said ‘that’s alright then’.”

(Friends of Norton Park, co-leader, Focus Group)

Most leaders showed high levels of perseverance, even stubbornness. One TBCF member, for example, had campaigned for 17 years for a new footbridge.

“John said that, without the community’s involvement - and particularly Karen’s persistence - the bridge would not have been built. Whilst the funds had been provided by the Coal Board the Council were slow to progress – Karen said it took 17 years of “pushing” from start to finish.”

(TBCF, case study narrative)

Similarly, the Friends of Norton Park said that one of their key attributes was their stubbornness. It was this that had kept them going, despite the obstacles they had faced.

“I think the biggest negative is when we come up against council obstructions. I mean to be honest, over the years, I’ve had so many battles with council, anybody else who wasn’t so dog-headed, so pig-headed would have just said, oh sod it, I’m not doing it.”

(Friends of Norton Park, Chair, focus group)

Assertiveness levels varied. A few leaders were very assertive, occasionally demonstrating almost aggressive (not physically) behaviour (TBCF, Friends of Gaskell Park, Friends of Norton Park). They were outspoken and forthright, challenging decisions and individuals who they felt were not supportive of the Friends Group. The TBCF leaders, for example, talked about having to “take the Officers on” / “had to actually fight” for the LNR designation. Another leader talked about having to stand-up to a local Councillor whose ideas for the park they did not agree with;

“What, well I guess I stood up to him and said we didn’t want to do these things and I challenged a few things that, er, he was doing and saying. And basically he huffed off and we’ve never seen him since!”

(Friends Group kept anonymous as sensitive, leader, interview)

Two group leaders were assertive, but more modulated in their approach. They tended to focus more on working in partnership with others. One example, observed during a visit, was when the Friends of the River Round leader spoke calmly but persuasively to a flooring shop, to ask if they could use his land to haul rubbish up. Later, he talked about how it is important to know when to push and when not to – see skills section next.

“They appeared unfriendly at first and looked like they were going to refuse to let us use their land. Geoff chatted to the Manager in a very relaxed and understated way, talking about the trees on the riverbank and how they were trying to improve the river. They ended up agreeing to let us haul the litter up on their land. I was impressed by Geoff’s approach – he didn’t push hard at all, saying we could haul it up from the bridge instead (which in reality would have been much harder), but this light-touch approach seemed to reduce the staff’s defensiveness and they softened visibly.”

(Friends of the River Round, fieldnotes)

Similarly, the Chair of the Friends of Hardy Rec had clear ‘red-lines’ when dealing with the local authority and would not be pushed around. However he would also listen to their issues and try to understand where they were coming from, working hard to maintain a positive relationship with them, as described in Chapter 8.

One leader, the Chair of Friends of Wilde Meadows, was not an assertive character. She was quiet and quite nervous, finding it hard to assert herself in front of authority figures. Whilst she would email them with requests, her face-to-face interactions were timid. She described seeing a senior member of the parks team and trying to get past him un-noticed, by putting her head down and walking past quickly. When interacting with an individual from the local authority that she knew well, she would approach them in a diffident, almost pleading way.

“I observed her asking Ranger 1 to address the footbridge issue and she came across as physically uncomfortable and apologetic– in my notes I said it was like she was “pleading with him to do the work”. It was also true when dealing with the more confident TBCF member (Michael) who she deferred to, tending not to speak in front of him.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

Aligned closely to assertiveness is levels of confidence. Most leaders were very confident, rarely expressing doubts or hesitations and believing absolutely in their cause. The exception again is the Friends of Wilde Meadows Chair who lacked this quality. She would talk about what she was “*rubbish*” at and said her requests were not fulfilled because it was “*just me asking*”.

Skills

Leaders showed high levels of skills, knowledge and expertise. Some were specific to a particular topic or issue, for example crime prevention (Friends of Norton Park), waterways (Friends of the River Round), fundraising (Friends of Gaskell Park), community organising (Friends of Hardy Rec) and political know-how (TBCF).

Other capabilities were more general, with high levels of organisational abilities, project management and the ability to deal with bureaucracy, evident. Impressive organisational skills were demonstrated by the Chair of the Friends of Hardy Rec. He had created an infrastructure that had operated since 2001. Each month he had chaired a meeting where every job in the park, large and small, was discussed. Nothing was removed from the agenda until it had been addressed and every meeting for almost 20 years had been minuted and published. Mark, who for much of this time had worked at the local authority, said his organisational skills were higher than most Officers. Another example is the Friends of Norton Park. Together the two leaders had created multiple policies that they offered to other groups when needed. They regularly and proficiently submitted funding bids and, as mentioned in Chapter 6, would also fill in forms for other local groups, so they were not put off by bureaucracy.

In contrast to these positive examples, the Chair of the Friends of Wilde Meadows struggled with bureaucracy, saying, for example, “*I’m rubbish at filling in forms*”. Similarly, the thought of the bureaucracy involved was one reason the Raven Hill resident did not want to set up a formal Friends Group (see later quote in ‘age / stage of life’).

Leaders were often very articulate, using this skill when advocating for the green space. They tended to relish the opportunity to speak up for the park or green space with professionals. The Chair of the Friends of Gaskell Park, for example, presented a petition at a full council meeting; she was undaunted by this, believing she was representing the wider community. Similar action was taken by the TBCF. In contrast, the Leader of the Friends of Wilde Meadows, was less articulate and tended to be nervous expressing herself.

This section set out to describe the leaders of the Friends Groups. They tended to be late middle age (50s / 60s) when they became involved and had retired from professional, often public sector, occupations. The majority of leaders were embedded within the community and motivated by a combination of personal fulfilment, altruism and love of the space. Their personal qualities were many and varied, including high levels of energy, commitment, perseverance, creativity and courage. Most were strong capable leaders, assertive and confident with good organisational, project management, bureaucratic and advocacy skills. One outlier existed. Whilst being committed, creative and passionate, as the others were, she lacked the strength, assertiveness, confidence and capabilities that they had.

Success Factors

How leader characteristics, described above, affect the success of the Friends Groups is now examined. As before, Table 7.2 presents, by group, the various factors potentially affecting success, with those that are shaded, identified as being explanatory.

Table 7.2: People Domain: Potential Success Factors

	Level of Success From higher (left hand end) to lower (right hand end)						
	Friends of Hardy Rec	Friends of Norton Park	Friends of the River Round	Friends of Gaskell Park	TBCF	Friends of Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Key Characteristics of leaders							
Age / stage of life – when starting out as Leader	40s, unemployed	50s, early retirees	60s Retired	Chair – 30s, working. Vice-Chair – late 50s / early 60s. Café Manger – 60s, retired.	Both Leaders – 50s, retired early.	Retired, 60s.	Stay at home parent, 40s.
Gender	Male mainly	Female and male	Male led	Female led	Male led	Female	Female
Type of occupation	Blue collar worker / community activist	Police Officers (ex) Public Sector.	Site Engineer for tele-coms (ex) Private sector.	Unsure for Chair. Others – CEO of charity, ex teacher Most – public sector.	Senior level council employees – planner / regeneration Public sector.	Unsure - librarian	Stay at home parent
Outsider or Insider? (to the community)	Insider	Insider	Less relevant as not community based	Insider	Outsider	Insider	Insider
Available time	High	High	High	Variable	High	High	Low
Leaders (initial) motivation	Public good / social justice	Emotional connection to space. Public good.	Personal - social / purpose. Love of water.	Public good / social justice. Plus love / connection to space.	Professional curiosity. Public good (nature).	Love of space / nature. Public good.	Functional / safety.

Personal Qualities							
Assertiveness	Assertive but modulated / careful	Highly assertive / very forthright	Medium level – modulated / careful	Very assertive / confrontational	Highly assertive / forceful	Meek / low levels of assertiveness	Direct, forthright
Confidence level	Very high	Very high	Fairly high	Fairly high	Very high	No – lacks confidence	No – lacks confidence
Capability – skills/ ability, knowledge	Very high	Very high – knowledge	High	High	Very high	Low	Very low
Status / authority	High- well known and respected	High – had positions of authority	Medium high – professional, though not connected	High – professional, connected.	Very high – professional, connected	Low – lacks connections / authority	Very low – female, uneducated, low social class

These findings are presented in three parts. First, the relevance of age and stage of life, and how that impacts on success, is presented. The second part discusses how capabilities, and previous occupations, affect success, whilst the final part explores authority, status and confidence.

The importance of age / stage of life

As discussed previously, most groups, successful or otherwise, were led by retirees. The relevance of this is that they had time to dedicate to their role. Given the level of commitment shown, this is clearly an important characteristic.

The Chair of Friends of Wilde Meadows, for example, had plenty of spare time to dedicate to the space. When discussing the wider communities lack of involvement, she said she needed to remember that not everyone else did.

“She is retired. (...) She says she has a lot of time on her hands – when we are talking about why people don’t volunteer, she says she has to remind herself that other people lack time.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

In contrast to most, the Chair of the Friends of Gaskell Park, lacked spare time. She still worked and had caring responsibilities, initially for a child and later for elderly parents. To sustain her role she had had to vary her involvement depending on her responsibilities, and had made a deliberate decision to not feel guilty about this.

“I mean I work, at one point I used to work part-time and then I changed to working full-time, and then I changed to working part-time but it has actually become full time. And so yer, as my commitments, and we’ve just recently had an elderly relative, that we were kind of committed to looking after, weren’t we? [husband concurring] So you have to be prepared to prioritise things in your life, haven’t you? And I think I personally have no problem saying “Look at the moment I can’t do as much as I can, but when I can, I’ll do it”. But I think some people think, “Oh, I’ve committed to doing that every weekend”. Well, no you haven’t, we volunteer, you’ve committed to do as much as you can do. And no more, you know, and if you can’t do it that weekend, whilst, we want to be open here every Saturday, and I will support and do that, (...) and I have done that, I have just stepped back and said I can only do every other Saturday now. And you have to be prepared to do that.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Chair, focus group)

The person identified as a potential leader in Raven Hill also had caring responsibilities, with multiple children still living at home with her. Whilst her decision to not take on the role had many aspects to it; it was clear that her life was busy and this affected her ability and desire to take on running the group. She was happy to help out sporadically by, for example, cleaning up litter, as this was something she could fit around existing commitments.

“No, well I don’t want that responsibility of having to... I don’t (...) somebody said something about a bank account and stuff and you’ve got to put that money in. And like the street I could just... I’ve got enough to do myself, I fit that [cleaning up] in around me, do you know what I mean?”

(Raven Hill, local resident, interview)

Stage of life therefore seems to be important factor. The pattern, of mainly being retired / in late middle age, illuminates the need to have spare time, to lead a Friends Group. The exceptions to this have had to adjust their mindsets and their contributions, in order for their involvement to be sustainable.

Capabilities

This section combines two success factors – capabilities (defined as skills, knowledge and expertise) and type of occupation, as there is a substantial overlap between the two.

As can be seen in Table 7.2, leaders who had professional occupations also tended to have high levels of capabilities, and the groups they led, tended to be successful. The opposite is also true, the leader and potential leader without a professional background also had lower levels of capabilities and the groups they were associated with, were less successful.

One mechanism for this, is that the skills and knowledge leaders had gained from professional occupations, were utilised in their Friends Group role. The Friends of the River Round, for example, had experienced issues whilst working with a partner organisation’s employees. They had been unhelpful, even obstructive at times, using the group’s tools or their van without asking. The leader said he knew how to handle this, when to confront things, when to let them go, due to his experience managing men on engineering sites.

“I’ve worked with blokes for 40 odd years, I know all the tricks you know, when you can, yes, someone needs telling or just let that one go, you get a bit of feel for people don’t you?”

(Friends of the River Round, leader, interview)

Other examples include; the leaders of the Friends of Norton Park using their policing experience to tackle anti-social behaviour in the park, one of the Friends of Gaskell Park leaders using their fundraising / bid writing expertise as a charity CEO to win grants for the Friends Group and the TBCF leaders using their experience of working in a local authority to influence decision-making processes, or “political know-how”.

Having a professional career therefore develops skills and expertise that can be used to help the Friends Group succeed. There is one exception to this pattern, in the form of the Chair of Hardy Rec. His, undoubtedly very high level of capabilities, had not been developed within a professional career. They were either inherent to him or been developed during his time as a community activist or whilst acting as Chair of his local Resident’s Association. Other potential mechanisms linking occupation and success are discussed next.

Authority, status and confidence

This section combines two success factors, from Table 7.2, relating to leaders. One is their level of status and the other is their level of confidence. These two factors tend to overlap, with high status leaders tending to appear very confident. Friends Groups with leaders possessing these attributes, tended to be more successful.

The two linked case studies provide a good illustration of this. The main TBCF leader was a high-status, highly confident individual, having worked at a senior level in the local authority and in the Trade Union movement. These two attributes contributed to his ability to successfully influence the local authority.

“When I retired I did have contacts back in the City Council at political level who trusted me to handle things competently, sensitively, but, at the same time, they knew that if they crossed me unreasonably, I’d have them”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

“Their approach was, at times, combative - Michael regularly talked about the “battles” they had had with the Council using phrases like “blood on the wall” with

regularity. Michael as an individual, and therefore the organisation as a whole, were not prepared to be pushed about by Officers or Councillors - they expected to be taken seriously and treated equally by Council employees, departments and councillors”.

(TBCF, case study narrative)

In contrast, the leader of the Friends of Wilde Meadows, who operated at a later time-scale in the same area, lacked status and confidence. She was aware of the difference in these characteristics between herself and the previous leader (and others in more middle-class areas), contributing to her lack of confidence and her ultimate disillusionment.

“An emerging theme – that I observed and Diane spoke about – is her lack of authority and power when interacting with (the local authority parks team). This is all the more obvious given the previous CF member (Michael) who had status, connections and high levels of self-confidence. Diane has none of these – saying directly that she lacks his ‘status’ and is a different type of person than him and it is “just me asking”. In June 2019 she tells me Ian and Ranger 1 do not take her seriously and they work more with other Friends Groups (based in more middle-class areas) who they get on better with. She feels the unfairness in this.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, case study narrative.)

Other successful leaders also have high levels of confidence, rarely displaying uncertainty or doubt in their abilities.

“Steve [the Chair] is outwardly quite bullish and assertive. Mark [previous Council employee, now Friend] says, during our walk around the park together, that he had a “fearsome reputation” at the Council and most Officers said “you must be mad” when he said he was working with him. He, however, thought “he was one that’s worth backing” and feels he has been proven right – emphasising how passionate about the park he is, how reliable and how committed.”

(Friends of Hardy Rec, case study narrative)

Having high status and confidence therefore appears to influence success. How this is gained i.e. what leads to people having these qualities, is now discussed.

Personal connections emerge as a theme. Leaders with powerful connections, often from their professional lives, used these to assert their power or influence over others, often local authority employees. This particularly applied to the TBCF leaders and, to some extent, the

Friends of Norton Park and the Friends of Gaskell Park. The TBCF leader talked openly about how the two leaders had used their connections to improve the “clout” of the Friends Group. At one point, experiencing difficulties in regard to their remit, they used personal connections to recruit a powerful, well-respected Chair.

“we reached the impasse and I could see they were not lending themselves to the concept. (...) Well, one of the advantages of John and I working in the system and therefore, in the one sense, it runs against the concept of Community Engagement, we knew how the system worked, so when I saw that [unnamed council employee], who was the officer and the councillor, who I will remain silent about, but, well, I realised I was getting nowhere and fortunately I was on excellent terms with [another unnamed council employee], who is now the [senior member] of the council, (...) and [a third council employee] who is no longer on the council but should have been leader of the council... they were both in the Labour Party. I went to them, and I said, “look, I’m pulling my hair out” (...) John and I were just led down the garden path. I mean we gave our bloody time for nothing you know. And, don’t get me wrong, I was enjoying the work, I did it for myself in the end but I wasn’t going to waste time with these two jerks constantly messing us about. Fortunately, [two council employees] they said, “leave it with us”, and that’s how (the Chair) came on the scene. They spoke to (the Chair), they rang me up and said, “Michael if you have a word with (the Chair), I think your problems will be solved”. And they were.”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

The Friends of Norton Park leaders were on good terms with a senior person in the local authority. They would utilise this connection, “*un-mercilessly*”, for example tweeting things they know they will re-tweet, to get support from local authority employees. In both examples the participants were aware that, in some ways, this was unfair. However, they justified it as a way of achieving what was needed for their park.

Authority and status also appear to be affected by an individual’s personal qualities. The Chair of the Friends of Hardy Rec was a powerful individual, not because of his professional background (which he did not have) but because of his commitment, skills and abilities that led to him being a well-respected individual locally.

It is also possible that gender contributes. When reflecting on the reasons the Chair of Wilde Meadows is not taken seriously by local authority employees, her gender, her personal qualities and her professional background all appear to inter-connect and be potentially relevant.

“I often wondered what aspect of Diane it is, that enabled the [local authority] to disregard her (as they seem to). I think it is partly her demeanour (not being a ‘forceful’, assertive character), partly her class (contributing to her lack of confidence when dealing with professionals), and partly her gender. It is probably all three. I can’t imagine the Rangers treating a man in the same way – or, perhaps a more assertive, connected woman.

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

As hinted in the excerpt above, gender is not definitively a limiting factor, indeed some of the successful groups were led mainly by women (Friends of Gaskell and Norton Park). However, those successful female leaders were confident, assertive and had high status, well-respected occupations. Gender therefore appears to inter-connect with other traits to contribute to levels of authority and status.

Other potential success factors are displayed in Table 7.2 above.

All leaders (bar Raven Hill who did not set up a group) were motivated individuals. However, not all groups were successful. The Chair of Friends of Wilde Meadows, for example, had a strong emotional commitment to the space and a desire to improve it for the public good (two key motivations) yet the group still failed. This demonstrates that whilst being motivated is important, it is not sufficient for success. The type of motivation varied between successful leaders, showing that why people are motivated is less important than being motivated.

There also appears to not be a pattern relating to whether or not the leader is an Insider or an Outsider, and success. Whilst most were embedded within the community, one Outsider did lead a group that was successful (at least in certain domains), whilst one true Insider was not successful. Being an Insider is therefore potentially helpful but not necessarily essential.

To summarise this domain relating to people. Leaders play a key role in the success of Friends Groups. Their commitment, perseverance, creativity and energy are vital, whilst being motivated and having the time to dedicate to the group are also important. Being confident, capable and having high status and authority separates out the more successful from the less, with personal connections also important.

The Process Domain

This section covers aspects relating to the process of setting up and running a Friends Group. It will describe how the case study groups started, how momentum was sustained,

the role of partners and, in two cases, how they ended. Once the process has been described, factors that appear to influence success or otherwise will be presented. The role of the local authority is touched upon briefly in this section but discussed mainly in Chapter 8.

Starting out

Three case studies, Friends of Hardy Rec, Gaskell Park and Norton Park, started in spaces where there had been very little community involvement previously. Two started from scratch, whilst one, Norton Park, had had two previous groups form, though neither properly began. The local authority had had a role in all three. They acted as a catalyst in two, calling meetings for local residents to encourage the formation of a group and to ask for volunteers. It was at one such meeting that the Chair of Friends of Gaskell Park volunteered to undertake this role. Ten years later, after the group had *"hit the doldrums"* the local authority organised a 'reinvigoration' meeting, which led to the currently active members becoming involved.

The formation of the Friends of Hardy Rec was attributed principally to seeing *"positive examples of community empowerment"* (Chair, paired-interview) nearby, including the next-door park setting up the first Friends Group in the borough, and a local resident's association. Local people started to think *"why haven't we got one [a Friend's Group] for our park?"* (Chair, paired-interview). Whilst the local authority did not act as the catalyst in this case, they were supportive of community groups and empowerment generally, due to historical community tensions that needed addressing. This is discussed more in Chapter 8, but at this point it is important to recognise that they were supportive of the Friends Group from the beginning.

"Going back to the early 80s, a lot of different groups, a lot of different initiatives, some projects, erm and a lot of, after the riot, the initial riots in the mid-80s, so-called riots, erm, er, there was a lot of erm, engagement with the council about the future of the estate and facilities needed to be improved and, as a result, there was a lot of recognition of the importance of the community groups"

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

Other groups built upon the work of previous funded projects or community involvement initiatives. The Friends of the River Round, for example, was formed after a National Lottery funded project, managed by a local water-based organisation (WBO) ended. To continue the

work they asked one of the volunteers if he wished to lead a Friends Group, with their support. As he had enjoyed volunteering and was looking for a role, he readily agreed. The TBCF was formed after a city-wide campaign to improve the quality of a local river had come to an end. Two of the key players set up the group to continue this work locally, using the community contacts they had made and some remaining funds. After nearly a decade of activity, the TBCF ended (for reasons described later) and the Friends of Wilde Meadows continued the work, albeit with a slightly different focus and remit.

How proactive the decision to become involved in a group varied. Some Chairs made an active, conscious choice to become involved. For example, the Chair of Gaskell Park, attended the local authority instigated meeting and made an active decision to volunteer to lead the group. Similarly conscious decisions to be involved were made by the leaders of the Friends of the River Round and TBCF. Other groups were led by Chairs who had reacted to events and become involved more due to circumstance. One example is the Chair of Friends of Norton Park. She had attended a meeting of the previous incarnation of the Friends Group to accompany her mother, who she thought could do with getting involved in something. Her husband relayed, in a humorous way, how he had warned her before setting off to the meeting *“don’t volunteer for owt and don’t get me involved!”* (Joint leader, focus group). At the meeting, she became involved in an argument with the previous Chair, who consequently resigned. The whole group then nominated her as Chair. She describes wryly how she was *“forced”* into post and then had to draw her husband in. Despite this, she had a strong connection to the park and has remained committed ever since.

Some participants noted that there had been a flourishing of Friends Groups across England in the early 2000s. Indeed, this was when four of the five established case studies were formed. Reasons for this growth were discussed in the Friends of Hardy Rec paired interview. One participant suggested that funding cuts had been beneficial, encouraging groups to form to save their local park. The other strongly refuted this, saying that it was due to a combination of desperation, optimism and inspiration. Desperation because the state of parks had become so poor, due to funding cuts in the 1980s and 90s, that people felt they had to act. Optimism because the availability of government funds from the New Labour government, such as the New Deal for communities and the parks National Lottery programme was *“on the horizon”*. And inspiration because seeing other Friends Groups be successful, encouraged more to form, leading to a positive feedback loop *“seeing success and being inspired is really important”* (Chair, paired-interview).

The need for local authorities to meet national government targets for community cohesion was given as the reason for this increase in new groups, by another group leader. Keeping going however was a separate issue, discussed more later on.

“Robert said, in a cynical way, that it came about from the government’s obsession with targets – they needed to meet community cohesion targets and one way of demonstrating this was to have Friends Groups. He is critical of this policy saying that many such groups fell by the wayside due to a lack of support and encouragement from the local authority.”

(Friends of Norton Park, case study narrative)

To summarise therefore, some groups were formed in parks where there had been very little community involvement previously, whilst others were continuations of previous initiatives or groups. For those in the first category, the local authority played a critical role, either as a catalyst or by providing more general support. This support structure however, needed to be reciprocated by individuals volunteering to lead the groups. In some circumstances individuals had made a conscious pro-active choice, whilst others had reacted to circumstances. Many Friends Groups were set up in the early 2000s due to a combination of national government policy, local government support, the availability of funding, seeing other groups being successful and the poor quality of green spaces due to low funding levels.

Sustaining momentum

This section describes how case studies were able to sustain their momentum. Five key themes are discussed: organisational aspects, sociability, funding, community involvement and encouraging responsibility.

Organisational aspects

Meetings were held by most groups. These were often monthly (for example Friends of Gaskell Park and Hardy Rec) but could be less frequent. One, the Friends of Wilde Meadows, only held one formal meeting a year (an AGM).

The inclusivity of meetings varied. Some were open to all members (for example Friends of Norton Park and Hardy Rec). In the former, local people could suggest ideas to the committee. Other groups held meetings that were just attended by committee members (e.g.

Friends of the River Round and Gaskell Park). One group held meetings in their own homes, due to difficulties using the communal space in the evening, though they recognised this potentially made the group less welcoming to others.

The formality of the meetings varied. The Friends of Hardy Rec and TBCF had the most formal meetings, with written agendas and minutes that were published for transparency, whilst others had a more informal style. All groups were constituted and had some policies. These were seen as necessary, but the emphasis on them tended to be low. The Friends of Norton Park had had an incident where a volunteer scratched their eye with a bramble. The fact they had a health and safety policy meant this could be dealt with correctly and was therefore reassuring. This same group recognised others could find writing policies challenging, they therefore allowed them to use and adapt theirs.

Social media was utilised by all groups to communicate with the public about events, activities or other news. Some used it to highlight incidents of antisocial behaviour. These pages were very popular with some having thousands of 'likes' or 'friends'. The negative aspects of social media were acknowledged, people could be abusive or fall out with each other for example, but it was seen as now being essential. Having a website was described by one participant as a major turning point for the group, giving them a presence and a feeling of solidity.

Having a separate 'closed' social media group for active volunteers (not the general public) was an important tool for the Friends of Norton Park. This enabled volunteers to find out more about what was going on and to have "*frank discussions*" (*joint leader, focus group*). It also provided some competition, for example, who had done the most litter picking. As volunteers could converse directly with each other, it reduced their reliance on the Chair, who otherwise would have to pass on information.

Sociability

Two groups had thriving 'hubs' within the park that were regularly frequented by committee members, volunteers and residents. The original intention of these spaces had been to welcome local residents to the park, be a space for activities and events and provide essential facilities. However, it emerged that they also provided a space for informal communication between Friends. The Chair of Hardy Rec said that not only had their membership seen "*a massive exponential increase when this building, when the Friends started operating in this building*" (*paired interview*) but that, due to its presence, much of the

communication between people involved in the park now happened by word of mouth, in an “indefinable” way. Similarly, the café, run by Friends of Gaskell Park, was where committee members met socially and communicated informally between meetings, plus engaged with park users to get feedback and hear suggestions. Here is one volunteer talking about how much she loved helping there.

“And I go home sometimes and I’m smiling to myself, cause I think, oh, we’ve, this has been brilliant. (...) I love it, I just love it. (laughs) I mean I come here Saturday and we’re in tomorrow anyway. But, [her husband, also a volunteer] is busy doing something. And I thought, I’m not staying at home, I was in yesterday. So I just enjoy it, gets me out in the fresh air, litter picking, just enjoy it. (...) Getting out in the fresh air, coming to the café, nice baking, nice food, talking to people. You know, the people that are here are nice. Yer. Hm.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, walking interview)

One reason, tentatively suggested by one participant, for the lack of engagement from ethnic minority families, was that they didn’t tend to socialise as much in cafes. This emphasises the importance placed on the space.

The Friends of the River Round lacked a physical indoor space to meet but had built sociability into their operations. At every workday, the leader set up a tea / coffee stand with biscuits and everyone had a break at the same time. In addition, one group of regular volunteers, mainly older men, went for a drink after most sessions. This helped build camaraderie and, as they said themselves, kept them coming back.

“When I asked the whole team what kept bringing them back, they said “Friendship” – including the “tea and biscuits” and going for a pint afterwards. Geoff says he now has 20 new friends that he can go out for a drink with when he wants to. The ‘boozy crew’, as he calls it, started out as a few friends but now about eight of them go out together every week after the sessions.”

(Friends of the River Round, case study narrative)

There was less evidence of regular in-built sociability in some of the other groups. The Friends of Norton Park, for example, lacked a physical indoor space to meet, though they did hold regular inclusive meetings and had a volunteer-only social media space. The emphasis of the TBCF was more on formal meetings and, whilst the Friends of Wilde Meadows did at times meet for a hot drink at a fast-food restaurant, this was ad hoc and less regular.

Funding

Receiving amounts of large lottery funding had been a 'game-changer' for two of the more ambitious Friends Groups (The Friends of Hardy Rec and TBCF). The former said the availability of lottery funds led to an *"air of optimism"* within the group; applying had focused their minds, encouraged them to develop a shared vision and made them *"up their game"* (member, paired-interview). It also encouraged the parks team to work with the Friends Group (see Chapter 8, local authority perspective), as community engagement was an essential part of the bidding process.

"making a lottery application, you kind of, of necessity, you really up your game, you know, what is the park about, what are you trying to do, how do you do it? You know, your thinking and your management approach goes right up"

(Friends of Hardy Rec, member, paired interview)

Another outcome of a successful lottery funding bid was that it meant the local authority had to commit to providing a certain amount of resource for the space. For Friends of Hardy Rec this meant that subsequent funding cuts affected their park less than those without such a guarantee. As discussed earlier (people domain, 'personal qualities'); the TBCF had had to fight strongly for this resource to not be diverted, but it meant the green space received more time and resource than it would otherwise.

Applying for smaller funding pots, in a more piece-meal way (Chapter 6 'activity type') helped sustain some of the other Friends Groups, namely Friends of Norton Park and Gaskell Park. This meant they could deliver activities and keep improving the park, thus maintaining enthusiasm amongst the committee and volunteers. One example was the Friends of Gaskell Park's successful application for a few thousand pounds to install a wildlife themed play trail. The committee were proud of this and had produced an accompanying leaflet, featured it on social media and had a launch event. It thus served as a positive focus point for them.

As mentioned earlier (Chapter 6, 'activity type') raising funds was less important for two groups, partly because they needed very little money for their activities. The Friends of the River Round were provided with most of what they needed by partners (see later) and had very little operational out-goings. And, even when they did raise funds, their planned use of them, was often disallowed. They had for example, successfully bid for funds to build a fence to prevent fly-tipping but, after this plan was rejected by the local authority sub-contractor,

they struggled to re-allocate the money. Many of the improvements they suggested e.g. benches / other features were not permitted by the land-owners. Similarly, the Friends of Wilde Meadows had funds, but their preferred way of spending them (to repair a foot-bridge) was thwarted by the parks team unwillingness to carry out the work. A frustration for them (discussed later) is that the emphasis of forums and of the parks team (at a city-wide level) was often on how to apply funding yet, this was not useful for them, as they did not lack money; what they lacked was dedicated time from the parks team to carry out work.

Community involvement

Most groups followed a similar model in terms of community involvement, comprising the leaders (discussed earlier 'people domain'), a smaller group of active members and a wider community of supporters.

Active members were the core group of people who, alongside the leaders, participated in the running of the group and the delivery of activities. Some were committee members and had a formal title, but many were not. Some attended meetings, but others preferred to do more practical tasks. Whilst it is not possible to give precise numbers, approximately 15-20 people per (established) group was often mentioned. Examples of active members, from the Friends of Norton Park, include the following. A woman who cleans the toilets daily and comes in regularly to garden. Another woman came in and started gardening, so the leaders gave her an area to look after, that she made beautiful.:

"she wandered across there and saw this piece of land and she started digging it up and making a border...."

(Joint leader, focus group).

A father and son did not attend meetings but every time there was an event on, came to help and would do anything asked of them. A family, with an autistic son, asked the leaders if they could find him something to do. They gave him a bit to garden, that they cultivated and was named after him. The whole family began to volunteer regularly and the son runs tours of the park for people with special needs. In the Friends of Gaskell Park, active members included, as examples, a man who switched their bank account to on-line, another who is "*handy with wood*" who installed a serving hatch in the café, made a sandpit and nest boxes in the park, and a woman who ran free weekly yoga classes. Such examples show the diversity of tasks people will take on, when given permission or encouragement.

Finding people to take on the necessary official roles could however be challenging.

“Everybody goes ‘yer, yer, I’m really interested, really interested’ but they’re not interested in stepping forward and being a key.... And in order to get a group going you have to have official titles, a Chairperson, a treasurer, and a secretary. Then you need a constitution, then you need a bank account, you can’t get a bank account without those four things. Right. Nobody wants to have a title.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Chair, focus group)

The Chair of Friends of Gaskell Park attributed this to people assuming it was too time-consuming. However, one active member, gave a different perspective, saying people may be shy or lack confidence, as she had been originally. She thought the key to increasing involvement is starting gradually, preferably by doing something ‘hands on’ or practical such as serving tea and coffee (and not paperwork). People would realise then, she thought, that they could contribute. Originally, she did not feel she would fit in with the group, as, to the surprise of the others, she saw them as very different to her, highlighting the importance of how people come across to others.

“Because I didn’t want to be involved with the paperwork side of things, it was more a practical, yes. But I think that then helps to build the confidence. (...) I think I turned up for a litter pick once and then I thought, ‘Oh, it’s alright, but I’m, I thought you were a little bit (pause) intellectual [the group laugh]. This is true, yes! Because sometimes you can tell by the way people talk like (Vice-Chair) and everything and er, yer. And I thought, ‘oh, a bit too intellectual for me’ but then when I realised it was a bit more hands on that could be done. And I love doing that.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, focus group)

Having a wide group of supporters helped sustain groups. In the more established groups, these could number hundreds, even thousands, in the form of social media ‘likes’, being on email lists or by signing petitions instigated by the group. This type of support aided their advocacy efforts, increased the voice of the group and added credibility to their efforts. Knowing that they were supported by the wider community also increased the morale and confidence of leaders. The quote below relates to a discussion about the petition organised by the Friends of Gaskell Park to keep a play park open.

“I: Going back to that petition, (...) were you worried about going up against the council? Or was that something...?”

P: "This is something people want, we all wanted it, but we're not, we're Friends of Gaskell Park, what we want is not necessarily what the people want is it? We want to represent what the people who use the park want. (...) And so, no I didn't feel worried, not at all, because we were representing what people had said to us."

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Chair, focus group)

Similarly, having a group of residents supportive of the TBCF's campaign to create three LNRs, had given their voice more weight within the local authority decision making process.

A couple of groups actively asked the wider community for suggestions or ideas. The Friends of Hardy Rec, for example, had organised a survey and a public consultation. These provided potential ideas but also added 'clout' when liaising with the local authority or applying for funding. The Friends of Gaskell Park kept a suggestion box in the café and would talk to visitors about what was important to them, it was from this that they realised the strength of feeling about shutting the play-park down.

One group, the Friends of Wilde Meadows, lacked both active members and wider community support. This was demotivating for the leader and was also perceived to reduce the influence of the group within the parks team.

"I mean he [the Ranger] has other groups and he seems to do much, it's like, maybe because they've got more volunteers, I don't know, but there is other groups where he seems to maybe respond a bit more. But I mean that's not fair is it? It shouldn't be like personalities, it should be what the area needs as far as I'm concerned."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

One reason for this lack of community involvement relates to the type of space (as discussed in the Place domain). Other reasons, suggested by the group's partner, were linked to deprivation. Compared to more affluent areas, where he had worked previously, people were more likely to experience poor health and to have caring responsibilities, and thus be less likely to get involved.

"it's probably more likely that people will still be in employment or they'll have kids that they are looking after or that they're carers for other people or that they're not going to get to retire at 55 and then have years and years of good health and fitness to go out and do things."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, partner, interview)

Conservation could also feel like a luxury interest given the struggles of everyday life.

“So you’ve got that problem of people’s priorities in their lives and actually if you’re working full time and you’ve got a family and you’re living in [area] or [area] and you’re kind of struggling to pay your rent or pay your mortgage and get your kids through school and do everything, are you really going to be that interested in, firstly do you have the time to give to a charity, and if you don’t have that time have you got an interest in your green spaces in your wildlife?”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, partner, interview)

Discontent amongst members of the public with the local authority was another reason given for the lack of involvement. A typical response, given to the partner organisation was, *“It’s Council owned, why should we contribute to it?”* (partner, interview) This attitude also emerged on social media.

Whilst the Raven Hill Friends Group did not successfully form and therefore cannot be compared directly, similar issues affecting engagement also arose there.

Encouraging responsibility

As discussed before (Chapter 6, ‘activity type’), a couple of the more established Friends Groups had started encouraging people from the wider community to take on their own initiatives or responsibilities within the park - as opposed to trying to deliver everything themselves. One, the Friends of Hardy Rec, described this as their ‘third phase³’ of

³ The first phase being the setting up of the Friends Group and its membership, the second being the management of the park’s maintenance.

development. They had deliberately created an infrastructure to encourage other groups to operate in the park, thus ensuring the space was well used.

“What we decided was, the more groups the better, so we would encourage people. Are you into performances? Set up a performing art collective to use the [named] theatre, which is a performance space that is grossly underused. And so, but it was a conscious decision to support initiatives, initiatives that did not have to go through the Friends”.

(Friends of Hardy Rec, leader, paired-interview)

This approach led to about twenty groups being based in the park. Some were sub-groups of the main Friends Group, including a wildlife group that managed the spinney and had get-togethers and another that planted and maintained trees. Other groups were more autonomous, for example, performance and food growing collectives and youth sports teams. Groups were encouraged to “do what they want to do” however, any work they were planning in the park had to be agreed at the Friends Group meeting. Whilst they would say yes, this removed uncertainty and ensured everyone involved in managing the park, including the local authority, knew what was happening. The other advantage of this approach, as described earlier, was that it increased the diversity of those involved.

The Friends of Norton Park also encouraged others to take on responsibilities e.g. maintaining a particular area (see ‘community involvement’ above), run an event or suggest ideas. The leaders emphasised however that ultimate control rested with them. One example was when a boy suggested, at a meeting, that the park should have an enclosed exercise area for dogs (he had almost lost his in the park). The committee had listened to his idea and asked him to plan and cost up his idea. They would then make sure it happened.

Other groups focused more on delivering activities and improvements themselves, via their active members. A down-side of this, emerged during conversations with Friends of Gaskell Park. Prior to 2014, the group described going through the ‘doldrums’; some active members had left, reducing the amount of activities / events they could put on, which in turn led to less members joining. This negative cycle meant the group lost momentum and needed reinvigorating.

In summary, there were many different aspects to sustaining groups’ momentum. All had constitutions, held meetings and used social media. Levels of formality and structure however varied, some operated very professionally, whilst others were more unstructured

and informal. Funding was a substantial step forward for some, generally more ambitious, Friends Groups, setting them on a path to major green space renovations and being able to garner more resources from the local authority. Smaller funding pots enabled Friends Groups to make improvements, thus sustaining engagement and enthusiasm. Having funding however, without the ability to spend it, either because of limitations on land-use or a lack of personnel, could be frustrating.

Most Friends Groups had, alongside the leaders, a core of active members and a wider community of supporters. The former helped deliver activities to improve the green space plus contributed to decision making. The latter increased the influence of the group and its confidence. Barriers to community involvement included a lack of time / confidence, the type of space, deprivation and negative attitudes towards the local authority. Encouraging community members to take responsibility emerged as a strategy for sustaining momentum and involving a greater diversity of people. This required an inclusive mind-set from the leaders, a way of encouraging people to get involved and the infrastructure to ensure activities in the park were co-ordinated. Such an approach was found to reduce the pressure on active members to always deliver.

Partners

The involvement of partners in sustaining Friends Groups, varied between cases. Partners, in this context, denotes other organisations working alongside the Friends Groups, supporting their endeavours. This does not include local authorities as this relationship is covered in the next chapter relating to power. The three groups established earliest (Friends of Hardy Rec, Norton Park and TBCF) had links with other local organisations, but otherwise tended to work fairly independently. In contrast, the newer groups worked more closely with partner organisations, albeit in a variety of ways.

The Friends of Gaskell Park is included in this latter category because when they were reinvigorated in 2014, they established a strong partner relationship with a nearby community organisation (CO). This organisation's Chief Executive (CEO) became the Vice-Chair of the Friends Group, with clear mutual benefits emerging. The park was the nearest green space to the CO so improving it meant there was a health-promoting space that service users could utilise. Volunteers from the CO helped at events in the park and at the café, a member of staff delivered activities there and activities in the park were promoted at the CO. The Friends Group also gained the professional expertise and fundraising skills of the CEO and, through her connections, gained a voice within local decision-making bodies;

she would advocate for the space during conversations with funders and commissioners. This relationship therefore benefited both organisations.

The Friends of the River Round had two key partners. The WBO that had instigated their setting up (see 'starting out') continued to give them a great deal of support, even after changes to their organisation and personnel, much to the leader's appreciation. This included access to resources, such as renting them a van, allowing them to use their premises and helping them with heavy jobs they were unable to do themselves. They also provided training, for example, on pesticides use and bush-cutting.

"Having a joint sort of, well assistance (..), like we do from [partner 1] and [partner 2], you need that sort of assistance, things like getting rid of the rubbish, or now and again you might need some heavy plant and they can provide it, because they've got that sort of resource which we don't need all the time but we can say 'can we have a chipper'. It's that sort of aspect, you do need that backing from the larger organisations yer".

(Friends of the River Round, leader, interview)

The WBO liaised with the local authority and its contractors on behalf of the Friends Group. It was they who dealt with much of the bureaucracy surrounding the planned fence to prevent fly-tipping; when this was refused permission they were as frustrated as the leader, commiserating together. The leader attributed his growing love of nature to the key contact at this partner organisation, saying she had inspired him and taught him a great deal. Together, they had delivered the 'Trout in the Classroom' sessions.

"the nature side of it, I used to go walking and that sort of thing which is good but, I'm now a bit more tuned into the nature side of it, if you know what I mean. Bits I've picked up working with [partner contact], she's very good, she's very knowledgeable, er, and you want to increase that knowledge now"

(Friends of the River Round, leader, interview)

The second partner organisation also provided practical support including supervising sessions, providing access to a boat and additional training (e.g. their helmsmen licences) plus they ran joint events together. This relationship was more functional and less warm, but useful nonetheless.

A Yorkshire conservation charity (YCC) was a key partner to both developing groups, though at different stages of their lifecycle and performing different roles. Different individuals were also involved.

At the start of this study the Friends of Wilde Meadows operated independently. However about six months into the study, the YCC became involved in the green space and therefore with the group. Major works were taking place on the green space and the YCC were employed to manage the ecological aspects of the work and increase community engagement. The project co-ordinator was employed for three years and soon became an important partner of the Friends Group. Initially the group's leader was wary, however gradually they developed a trusting and positive relationship and, by the time the group ended (see later), she was relieved to be handing over the group's responsibilities to him. How this relationship developed was explored.

YCC co-ordinated activities in the green space and involved the leader in these. They were able to bring in more volunteers and other organisations to the space. One example was an activity day in winter planting whips and wildlife friendly plants. The YCC brought in apprentices and two other specialist conservation organisations to help. The Friends Group leader joined in, enjoying the activity, saying how good it was to be doing something other than litter picking (which was normally what the local authority encouraged during joint activities). The YCC project co-ordinator also liaised with the local authority and their employees, on behalf of the Friends Group and the green space.

The YCC project co-ordinator's interpersonal skills were one reason for the positive relationship. He listened to the leader, fed information back to her and kept her involved, but did not try to take over. They also had similar interests and passions, both being nature-lovers. The Friends Group leader said her knowledge of nature was limited so she was grateful for his expertise. Importantly he served as a 'buffer' between her and the local authority, reducing some of the stress associated with this relationship (see Chapter 7 'ending' and Chapter 8). He was appreciative of the leader, recognising her assets and thinking about how to tailor activities to suit her skills. As will be seen later, much of this contrasted with her experiences with council employees.

"There are people like Diane who probably, when I come to doing the major part of the planting, she probably won't come out and help with a lot of that because I think physically she can't cope with bending down a lot and doing the planting and kind of

being up and down all the time⁴. But she's still got a valuable role within [area] because she's a kind of like a pillar of the community almost because she knows so many people she is quite active on social media so she can put messages out for us. She organises a lot of events with other groups as well so family events and kids events and she does litter picks and things like that. So in a sense if the [national organisation he worked for previously] were working with Diane they probably wouldn't want to work with her that much because she couldn't do everything that they wanted her to do, but my opinion is that she does a lot, she does a lot of extra things she puts a lot of time into it and if she can't, if there are some things she can't do then she can't do them, I find other people to do them."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, YCC project co-ordinator, interview)

In the latter part of the above quote, the partner refers to a different national organisation he had worked for previously. Their approach to working with volunteers was, he said, to be 'task, not volunteer' focused, so if an individual did not suit their needs, they were no longer required. He felt this was too harsh, preferring to work in a more person-centred way, adjusting the tasks to suit the individual's skills and interests and trying to balance this with what needed to be done.

In this case therefore, the partner was much-appreciated support for the Friends Group. The support provided was practical, bringing in more people, resources and expertise, and emotional, especially by removing the need for her to liaise with the local authority. She felt, with his support, that she had somebody on 'her side'. They also shared similar visions in terms of the green space.

⁴ She has reduced mobility and pain from a health condition.

As is discussed later ('ending' section), this support was not sufficient to sustain the group as an organisation, which folded the following year, however it did have some positive outcomes. The presence of the YCC meant that much of the work the group had done was retained, and they were able to draw on their community knowledge and connections. The group leader felt a great responsibility for the space, and, as she lived over-looking it, could not ignore it, but this had started to become a burden. Her trust in the YCC project co-ordinator enabled her to end the group in the knowledge that it would still be cared for, thus reducing her anxiety. She was able to stay involved as a volunteer, contributing to the green space but without the responsibilities she had been struggling with. Arguably the YCC co-ordinator could have tried to build strength of the group and support the leader to continue. However, given the many issues the group faced (including, for example the leader's lack of confidence and status and her poor relationship with the local authority) it was perhaps not possible to do this.

In Raven Hill the same conservation organisation, the YCC, though with different individuals, was involved in trying to instigate the formation of a Friends Group. At the time of the last interaction with them, towards the end of their funded project, a group had still not been set up, though "*glimmers of hope*" were emerging (*Raven Hill, YCC project co-ordinator, interview*).

Some of the reasons for not managing to establish a Friends Group have already been discussed earlier in this chapter – including the wildness of the space, the amount of antisocial behaviour and the level of deprivation (Place domain) and the potential leader's lack of skills, capabilities and status (People domain). Here, one other contributing factor will be introduced, and that is the difference between the potential leaders and the partner organisation, YCC, in terms of their vision for the space.

The local residents identified as potential leaders, appreciated the efforts of the YCC to improve the space and deliver activities, and a warm, friendly and trusted relationship had developed between them. However, their desires for the space focused on safety and being able to use it as a place to socialise and play (see People domain, 'motivations'), whilst the YCC's focus was on nature, nature connection and environmentalism. One example relates to bouncy castles. A local resident wanted to install one in the green space for a celebration. The YCC however were not keen, as the generators would be noisy and un-environmental. In recognition of their desire for a celebration she looked into alternatives e.g. bicycle powered bouncy castles and a 'hand-made parade'. Later, after talking to other people working in urban nature, she realised that for the sake of building relationships with local

people, sometimes you have to compromise, though she still worried that could set a negative example for the future.

“we [at a work event] talked about bouncy castles and we were like, sometimes you’ve just got to do it, and set aside you know, your, your reservations about how this is not particularly you know, not very green let’s say. But does pull people out. Because you’ve just got to start where people are. I suppose the worry is that you, you start where people are and actually you struggle to move them anywhere and then you’ve kind of just, you’ve kind of compromised and then you are just stuck in the same place.”

(Raven Hill, YCC project co-ordinator, interview)

Another example is when the local resident talked about how, in a green space close to her previous house, a builder put spare debris in mounds and covered them in concrete. The kids loved cycling over them. She was aware however the YCC would not support this type of activity. One example of a compromise that did work was when the YCC installed willow football posts and organised strimming of the thistles, so children could play there.

This ‘cultural clash,’ plastic vs natural, fun vs calm-ness, is something that the YCC project co-ordinator was very aware of. She described visiting a local community fair. Whilst other stalls were selling brightly coloured plastic items, she was trying to get people to interact with leaves and pine-cones. She laughed whilst recounting this story, but concluded that, whilst she got less attention, some people enjoyed the peace and calmness her activities offered.

“But we were surrounded by kind of bright plastic and noisy fairground rides and loads of people were just, just walked past us and looked us ‘What are you guys doing with your leaves? And all your drawing pens and you know’. But a few kids did come and join in with us and had a really lovely time, but I was just like we can’t compete with this bright plastic everywhere... (laughing)”

(Raven Hill, YCC project co-ordinator, interview)

This mis-match in desires, between what the YCC hoped for in the neighbourhood and what the community felt they wanted, potentially contributed to the lack of success in forming a Friends Group. Whilst the YCC were undoubtedly well-meaning and genuine in their belief that nature can improve people’s lives, it did appear to be, in part, an outsider-imposed agenda. The adult community showed little interest in interacting with nature, perhaps not surprisingly given the scale of life challenges they face, including a fractured community, high levels of poverty and the poor state of the green space.

Towards the end of the project there are some hopes that other local residents may be interested in forming a Friends Group. Via informal networking, six or seven local people (not the initial individuals identified) had expressed an interest in coming to a meeting. The YCC emphasised that it would take time to establish and require her support for a while, but she sensed some chance of success.

The role and importance of partners in the setting up and the sustaining of Friends Groups is therefore varied. For some more established, arguably stronger groups, the need for partners is less and they are able to operate almost independently. Other less established groups can gain a great deal by having a partner on-side. They can act as a catalyst for formation and help sustain them by providing resources, expertise and support. They also play an important role as a 'buffer' between the Friends Group and the authorities, helping the former cope with set-backs and bureaucracy. Having a warm, positive personal relationship appears important as does sharing a similar vision for the space. There are some signs that it is possible for a funded partner organisation with strong values to 'take-over' slightly and impose their views on local residents. Listening, being prepared to compromise and acting in a supportive, not domineering way, emerges as a possible way forward.

Ending

Two case studies (linked to each other) included the ending of the groups. One had a managed, planned ending, whilst the other was unplanned and reactive to circumstances.

The TBCF ended in 2013 when it had been in operation for nine years. The National Lottery project came to an end, so it felt a 'natural' time to finish. In addition the key individual and instigator of the group, decided to retire fully.

To try to ensure sustainability, a key part of the National Lottery project had been to encourage the setting up of a series of Friends Groups in the green space. The 'second-in-command' (of TBCF) agreed to stay on to help with this aspect, on the proviso that another person (who later became the Chair of the Friends of Wilde Meadows) would do much of the day-to-day work. Nine potential Friends Groups within the valley were identified in 2012, and funds set aside to support them. However, by 2019, none of these were flourishing, two still existed but with very few members and many of the others had not formed. Difficulty getting local people involved, was cited as the main problem for these Friends Groups. Most people, it was felt, only got involved when the green space was threatened. One example was when the local authority proposed building a school and a sports centre on a local green space.

This created tumult with people petitioning and attending a public meeting. However, once the threat was removed, people no longer stay engaged.

“they were going to build a big school and a new attached sports centre to it. And people again were absolutely in uproar because it’s a field. And we had a thousand people petitioning online. So we formed a little bit of a Friends Group again. As soon as a threat goes away they’re not, the people disappear so again it was me and [named individual] you know two people and nobody came to the meetings afterwards so as soon as that threat goes away they, I don’t know, the interest goes.”
(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, Interview)

Without the drive, energy and commitment of the key leader, and wider involvement from the community, much of the TBCF’s legacy therefore disappeared. Some aspects remain; the Friends of Wilde Meadows formed (see below) for a period of time, the LNRs are a permanent feature and some volunteers from the National Lottery project remained part of a local authority task-force, but otherwise, their influence diminished.

The Friends of Wilde Meadows were part of the study from June 2018. At that point the Chair was optimistic and determined, fully committed to improving her local green space. A year later however, she had decided to end the Friends Group and re-distribute any remaining funds. By then, she had become demoralised and angry. Seeing this change happen, in real-time, provided relevant data but was also upsetting.

“Seeing Diane’s enthusiasm for her role as Chair of the Friend’s Group diminish and be crushed by her experiences with [the local authority] was dispiriting and, at times, upsetting. Whilst she had some weaknesses (for example her lack of forcefulness, her naivety and her trouble recruiting volunteers) she also had significant strengths and, if she had been supported, her contribution could have been even more substantial.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

The principle reason for this change, was the Chair feeling unappreciated and disrespected by the local authority parks team. This is discussed more in the next chapter, but a key point is that, whilst the Chair still wished to look after and maintain the green space, she felt she could no longer work formally with the parks team. This relationship had always been challenging, but she had persevered until a number of ‘triggers’ led to a breakdown in trust. These are described in more detail in the next chapter but include; refusing to repair a footbridge (despite asking repeatedly and offering them funds), holding a launch event

relating to the green space without inviting her (or indeed the YCC) and, it emerging, after ten years, that they were not following the management plan she thought had been agreed.

"[they] said it was a blueprint and it had never come into fruition. Which is not really, I didn't think was true [short laugh]."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

Being frustrated by the wider community's lack of involvement with the space contributed to the decision to end the group, but in a more minor way.

"I mean like, the estate, they don't want to know, they don't help even though it's on their doorstep and it's a lovely place for them to go. But we can't get them involved."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

The decision of another committee member, who she had a good trusting relationship with, to resign from his role also contributed. She was understanding about this but it made her feel more alone, plus it led to her re-assessing how her aims were potentially different to that of the original TBCF leaders.

"I'm sort of upset that me and John are going our separate ways in a way, you know, but I think he has a different idea of maybe, because he was always in the planning and the management side of it whereas I've been on the ground as such you know."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

Ending the group was a relief for her. During an interview a few months after resigning, she said it *"feels like a cloud has lifted"* as she no longer had to deal with the local authority.

Her involvement with the green space however remained. Six months after her decision to end the group she said she *"can't keep herself away from the green space but (is) not operating as a formal Friends Group"* (Chair, phone interview). She regularly volunteered with the YCC, led group walks, visited the space regularly to *"keep an eye on things"* and posted regularly on social media. In addition, she became involved more broadly in the community, working alongside other organisations. At our last interaction (post pandemic), she had successfully applied for funding with her housing manager to plant trees, was a trustee for a local community hub and had been involved in making a film about the area with an arts organisation. She appeared far more content working with other community people, than being a group leader.

The two groups therefore ended for very different reasons and in contrasting ways. However, a common feature was that both groups were unable to survive the loss of the lead person; their departure was a decisive moment and neither was able to find another individual with the commitment, passion and interest to replace them. Both also lacked the infrastructure e.g. an active committee, that might have helped sustain their group after the leader left.

The other case studies, still in operation and still with the same leaders, spoke very little about future plans or sustainability. It is not possible to know what might happen if a leader decided to leave. However, many did have more active members and a more substantive infrastructure (especially Friends of Hardy Rec but also Friends of Norton Park, Gaskell Park and River Round), so there is a possibility at least, that they could survive the loss of their leader (see Table 6.7).

Success Factors

How process related features affect the success of Friends Groups is now examined. Table 7.3 presents, by group, how various features of how they operate relate to their level of success. As before, those that are shaded indicate that that particular factor, is explanatory for success.

Table 7.3: Process Domain: Potential Success Factors

	Degree of Success From higher (left hand end) to lower (right hand end)						
	Friends of Hardy Rec	Friends of Norton Park	Friends of the River Round	Friends of Gaskell Park	TBCF	Friends of Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Starting Out	Inspired by other groups. Pro-active.	Reactive – got persuaded! LA instigated.	Pro-active decision. Built on former project.	LA instigated. Chair reactive initially.	Pro-active. Deliberate decision based on earlier work.	Reactive – asked by previous group.	Asked but refused to take on role.
Formality	Very high – meetings, minutes, policies, actions. Focus on building solid infra-structure.	Fairly high – policies, meetings, website with public documents.	Some formality but not focused on it. Monthly committee meetings.	High (more so since 2014) – committee meetings, minutes, policies.	Very high. Many policies / procedures. Job titles.	Informal. AGM only meeting. No public minutes.	N/A
Regularity / frequency of activity	Regular and frequent	Regular and frequent	Regular and frequent	Café is regular and frequent. Often activities more ad hoc.	Regular time commitment but less frequent activity	Irregular group activities, frequent lone activities.	N/A
In-built sociability	Yes – hub encourages informal communication	Partly – team have a strong bond and events are social occasions but lack space.	Yes – breaks plus pub visits integral part.	Yes – cafe encourages informal communication	No – quite professional style.	Less so. More solo.	N/A
Funding	Large funding bids, with LA, successful.	Large amounts of funding, from variety sources.	Limited funds but adequate for needs.	Small pots of funding successfully applied for.	Large funding bids, with LA, successful.	Funds adequate for needs.	N/A

Community involvement	Group of active members plus wider community support.	Group of active members plus wider community support.	Group of active members plus wider community support.	Group of active members plus wider community support.	Less active members – mainly just Leaders. Some wider community support.	Lack active members and wider community support.	Lack active members and wider community support.
Community encouraged to take action	Yes –many active sub groups	Yes – people encouraged to take on tasks / spaces	Not really. leader decides on tasks but will listen to suggestions.	Not really. Committee make decisions but open to suggestions	No – leaders agreed direction	Not really relevant as leader main person involved	N/A
Clear vision	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mainly yes. Though some differences between members.	Follow leader's vision	Less so- leader's vision different to other key member	No – tension between residents and partners
Partner support	Not really – operate independently.	Not really – mainly operate independently	Two key partners High level of support / partnership work.	Yes. Strong links with local community groups.	No – more independent.	One partner became involved later. High support.	High level of support – multiple agencies

Structure and formality

How formally the group operates and how regular their activities are, are both associated with levels of success i.e. more successful groups tended to operate more formally, with more regular activities and vice versa.

Having a structure within the group, it was suggested, leads to people feeling they have support and are part of something 'solid'. The Chair of Friends of Hardy Rec (the most successful group) said that this type of infrastructure is present for employees of business / government organisations but often not there for volunteers in community groups. Having this supportive infrastructure led, he felt, to people feeling secure and therefore more empowered.

"you have to create the community infrastructure that gives that kind of support and encouragement and vision and determination to individuals and communities, so, so, and I think yer regularity, transparency, minutes, and correct, and all that kind of stuff is part of creating that, people feel there's something solid that they are part of."

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

When the Friends of Gaskell Park was re-invigorated, the new Vice-Chair insisted on a more professional approach being taken; for example holding regular committee meetings and making sure minutes were published. Previously the group had operated in a more informal, relaxed way and this, she felt, was not appropriate when having more ambitious plans. The least successful group lacked formal processes with their committee only meeting annually and, whilst there was a constitution, it was not very familiar to participants.

Similarly, holding regular activities led to improved engagement. The Friends of River Round placed a great deal of emphasis on meeting every week, at the same time, with each workday following a similar pattern. This had led to a regular group of volunteers who had built the activity into their weekly routines, knowing what to expect. In contrast, whilst the Friends of Wilde Meadows did many activities, they tended to be more ad hoc and irregular.

Both aspects, having a degree of formality and holding regular activities, appeared to help create a feeling of tangibility, there was something substantial about the group that people could interact with. This seemed to lead to them feeling more comfortable and secure in engaging with the group; they knew what to expect and how things worked.

Connections and positivity

Building sociability into the group and its activities was also generally associated with being more successful. This was easier to engender if a physical space was available (a café or a hub) but it could also be built into activities (as per the Friends of the River Round). Having a space where members could have conversations, helped build informal connections between individuals and groups, which could lead to collaborations and discussions. It also helped people make friends with other members, meaning they enjoyed being part of the group and thus more likely to stay involved.

These three factors therefore, formality, reliability and sociability, all play a role in the success of the groups, helping sustain momentum. They contribute to a feeling of positivity, security and substance, making the group something people want to be part of and feel comfortable in. At times, this could be sensed when taking part in activity. With the Friends of River Round, for example, the workday felt upbeat, positive and fun, despite the hard work involved. People were ‘in it together’.

“[I] also like the organising thing, doing, you know, organising the volunteer days and, er, at the end of the day, everybody has had a good time and I think that is probably the reward for me.”

(Friends of the River Round, leader, interview)

Community involvement and engagement

As can be seen in Table 7.3, the more successful groups had a group of active members plus wider community involvement, whilst the less successful groups lacked these. These aspects appear to be both a factor affecting success, and an outcome of a successful group, contributing to a positive or negative cycle of engagement.

Groups that were well-organised with frequent activities (as described above) tend to lead to people wanting to engage with it, thus building momentum with more activities and greater engagement. The reverse is also true, the Friends of Gaskell Park described a previous negative cycle where, when they had fewer active members, it led to fewer activities and then fewer people wanted to be involved. To reverse this negative cycle they had had to re-invigorate, bringing in new, active members.

Building a group of people who are willing to help run the group and deliver activities is therefore critical. Without this, groups become too dependent on a small number of individuals, this puts more pressure on them, and they start to feel both responsible and alone (as the Chair of Friends of Wilde Meadows did). The group can then become vulnerable as, if they leave, it is unlikely to be able to carry on.

The most successful groups had encouraged other community members to deliver activities and improvements themselves. This approach drew more diverse people into the parks and led to more activities and improvements. Again, this is partly a factor leading to success but is possibly also an outcome of being a successful, mature group. In both examples, Friends of Hardy Rec and Norton Park, the first stage of their development was focused on improving the park and delivering activities and events themselves; only once this had occurred, did they start to focus on encouraging other people and groups to deliver themselves. This approach requires infrastructure to ensure activities are co-ordinated plus an enabling mind-set amongst the leaders.

One final success factor identified is having a shared vision for the space. The most successful groups were clear about how they wanted the space to be and what their role was. Groups that lacked this, for example, Raven Hill and, arguably, Friends of Wilde Meadow, did not tend to be as successful. The mechanism for this was not clearly identified but possibly involved the energies of the group being directed in a particular direction, plus people feeling comfortable engaging with a group that has clear direction. This could be seen, for example, when a group instigated a campaign. Having a cause e.g. saving a play park or raising funds for a picnic area, united and energised members of the public.

Other potential factors examined did not show such a clear pattern with levels of success. This included how and why groups started. Successful groups were started both proactively and reactively and on sites with or without previous community involvement, indicating that this is less important for long term success than how a group operates afterwards. The level of partner support also did not pattern with levels of success. It appeared that more successful, established groups had less need for a key partner, whilst some newer groups did benefit from their involvement. Funding also showed variation, with less patterning with success, compared to other factors. Some more successful groups had secured large funding bids and this had been a 'game-changer' for them. However, assuming there was access to some resources and small funding pots

available, other groups, successfully operated with little money. Arguably their ambitions were less and this could change over time.

To summarise this domain relating to process. Having some formal structures and regular activities, along with a group of active members and wider community support, plus a shared, clear, vision are all important aspects to building a successful Friends Group. Making the group feel solid, tangible and sociable is important for engagement. Partners can be a helpful support for some groups, on the proviso, as discussed previously, that they are able to build a mutually beneficial relationship with similar visions for the space. Access to substantial funding and an approach that encourages community members to take on responsibilities helps ambitious, mature groups achieve greater impact.

This concludes this chapter, where three domains, Place, People and Process, and their role in the success of Friends Groups has been explored in detail. In Chapter 9, the discussion, a model is proposed that illustrates these findings, along with those in Chapter 8.

Chapter 8: The Relationship with Local Authorities

This chapter focuses, from two differing perspectives, on the relationship between Friends Groups and local authorities. This incorporates the power dynamic between them, constituting the fourth and final domain. Whilst the study always intended to explore this relationship, during data collection it emerged as a major theme and thus deserving additional attention.

First, the perspective of the Friends Groups themselves is given. This section describes their relationship with the local authority, as they see it, the key issues involved and the impact of these issues on groups. The second part of the chapter gives the perspective of local authority parks teams, based on interviews with staff (phase 3 of this study). This contains information relating to their opinions of Friends Groups, how they see their role in supporting them, and any issues working with them. Both sections include their perspective on how this key relationship could be improved.

One participant, within the Friends of Hardy Rec case study, blurred the lines between these two perspectives. He had once been employed by the local authority, as a senior officer working with the Friends Group, but, after retirement moved to working directly with them. His 'dual' perspective is included in the first section. Also of note is that The Friends of the River Round had limited contact with their local authority as the maintenance of the city's infrastructure had been contracted out to a privately owned firm (PC). Their interactions were therefore with this organisation, as opposed to the local authority directly.

In regard to terminology, Friends Groups tended to talk about 'the council' or 'the local authority' as a whole but, generally, they were referring to the department responsible for maintaining and improving green spaces, and the officers employed within it. Names for this vary between authorities but, for consistency, 'parks team' is used here. When findings relate to a different section of the local authority, for example elected councillors, neighbourhood teams or central bureaucratic roles, this is made clear.

The Friends Groups perspective

Frustration and anger

Nearly all the case studies, including successful ones, had a difficult relationship with the parks teams they worked with. Irritation, frustration and anger emerged consistently. During interactions participants would switch from being jovial, friendly and positive to

tense and negative when the parks teams were discussed. At times, their emotions were very raw.

“The major source of frustration, irritation and, at times, anger, for Carol and Robert is the local authority’s attitude towards the Friends Group. They see them as obstructive “they cock us up left, right and centre” and uncaring about the park “if this place went downhill back to how it was, it wouldn’t bother them at all”. This is compared unfavourably to them putting their “heart and soul” into improving the park.”

(Friends of Norton Park, case study narrative)

“Emma’s mild manner changes when talking about [the local authority]. She feels that they do not appreciate the Friends and their expertise and does not trust them – she calls their key contact at [the parks team] “Mr Do-little” or “Mr Ivory Tower”.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, case study narrative)

Not feeling appreciated for their efforts, or being listened to, their local knowledge being ignored and generally not being respected, were common themes. At times, these difficulties tipped into personal animosity (see quote above), with individual relationships becoming extremely fractious or breaking down. In one case, the Friends decided to hold their meetings apart from the parks team, after an employee wrote “no way” next to one of their suggestions. This highlighted to them just how different their intentions and approaches were.

Relationships with local neighbourhood teams were more positive. Participants often said how helpful they were and how they could not do enough for them, giving examples of close mutually beneficial work relationships. In one case the Friends asked the neighbourhood team to fell some trees. They were reluctant, anticipating a negative community response, so the Friends Group agreed to ‘take the flak’ for them. They visited the few complainants, explained the work had been done at their request and this was accepted. Where the difficulties lay, were with the parks teams and those in central, more bureaucratic roles.

“With the neighbourhood team- we have a great relationship and they’ll do ‘owt for us and we’ll do ‘owt for them but it’s the higher tiers we have trouble engaging”.

(Friends of Norton Park, co-leader, focus group)

One very successful case study, the Friends of Hardy Rec, provided a counter example, having managed to establish a positive working relationship with the parks team in their area, co-managing the space together. How this was achieved will be discussed later in 'building collective responsibility'. Now the focus is on the key issues undermining most of these relationships.

Being obstructive

A common feeling amongst participants was that the parks team often acted obstructively, thwarting their efforts to improve the space. Typically, the Friends Group would plan something for the space and raise the necessary funding, but, quite late on, the parks team would refuse their permission / help with the work, therefore preventing the plans taking place. Many such stories emerged, some of which are described below.

The Friends of Norton Park has, as its centre-piece, a large ornamental lake, the concrete edging of which had deteriorated. The Friends contacted the local building company who had installed it 80 years previously. They, as part of their anniversary celebrations, offered to replace it for free, at a value of many £10,000s. Many meetings were held with the local authority and the company concerned. Just before it was signed off however, the company asked to speak to the local authority's landscape architect, who refused to engage with them *"until I find out who is paying my wage for advising you"*. The offer was withdrawn immediately after.

Another example touched on in Chapter 6 'activity type,' involves the Friends of the River Round. One section of the riverbank they maintained suffered greatly from fly-tipping. The Friends regularly removed it but, as it was steep difficult terrain, this was hard, dangerous, work. In order to prevent fly-tipping they, and their partner, made plans to build a fence next to the pavement. The landowner approved the work and the Friends raised the necessary funds. However, PC refused permission, saying any fence would have to be built further down the riverbank, which, the Friends said, would mean rubbish piling up in the gap. If they did put the fence next to the pavement, they were told they would have to pay to re-surface the whole area. The normally calm and diplomatic leader (an ex-site engineer for BT), was incredulous, repeatedly bringing the decision up, calling it *"bonkers"* and the PC *"Awkward"*. This decision meant that the Friends still have to clear the bank of industrial fly-tipping.

"it was (the PC) who prevented us putting up the fence to stop fly-tipping because they say 'we need to maintain that wall', but it wasn't their wall anyway and we got

permission from the landowner, it just got crazy and, then we had to pay for, even though we hadn't done anything if we took it any further we'd have to pay something for another survey, and we wouldn't have got the permission anyway, it was just a bit bonkers, yer."

(Friends of River Round, leader, interview)

The Friends of Gaskell Park had similar experiences whereby the parks team had refused permission for fairly small-scale changes. In one example, the Friends had consulted with some young people who requested a piece of sports equipment⁵ to be installed. The Friends could fund this from café profits and contacted the parks team. Their response was that, before this could be considered, they would have to review all the sports pitches in the area. The Friends saw this as a way of delaying their plans, causing considerable frustration. A similar incident with a bowling green also occurred. Whilst the neighbourhood team had said they could turn one of the greens into a 'pitch and putt' for families, the parks team refused, citing a regional review of facilities.

"Now, regarding the [sports equipment], he said I'll have to pass that by Mr Ivory Tower. My heart sank, I know what was coming back... What came back was exactly what I expected. He's going to undertake – this will make you laugh...(..) He said he will do a review of all the parks equipment in all of [the city's] parks and that will take in all the courts, all the pitches all the changing rooms, all the MUGA⁶ equipment in all of [the city's] parks. He is going to undertake this big review. Now whereas we're welcome to pay for [sports equipment],, it will have to be part of parks review. And I thought, do you know what, you've just kicked that ten years down the line."

⁵ This has been kept vague to preserve anonymity

⁶ Multi-use games area

(Friends of Gaskell Park, member, focus group)

All these examples led to considerable upset for the Friends Groups and a deterioration in their relationship with the parks teams. Some participants appeared bewildered, unable to comprehend the decision as they felt that they had proposed something logical and helpful that required little input from the local authority. Not supporting it therefore seemed illogical, even perverse, with the proffered reasons not making sense. There was a suggestion from one or two that those concerned were being deliberately obstructive as they did not 'like' the Friends Group – more on this later.

These types of incidents appeared to deflate participants. They had been proud of their ideas, put time and effort into them and this now felt wasted. It is possible they also felt that they had 'lost face' as they had engaged with stakeholders only to not be able to deliver.

Disagreement and conflict

Conflict emerged as a key theme, often emanating from disagreements over changes to the green space. In most cases, this involved the parks team proposing a particular course of action and the Friends Group disagreeing. When they were unable to agree, this escalated into open, often public 'battles' involving press campaigns, petitions and presentations to 'full council' (see Chapter 6, 'lobbying/campaigning'). The Friends Groups often eventually won, but the process damaged relationships.

Two examples involved the local authority planning to close facilities that the Friends Group believed were essential; public toilets in the case of Norton Park and a play-park in Gaskell Park. In the latter case, the local authority proposed removing one of two play parks, saying it was in an inappropriate place, they did not have the money to maintain it and vandalism was an issue. The Friends felt strongly that it needed to be retained, as it is a large park and the play areas serve different communities. They also disputed the reasonings. One Friend said she knew it was not too boggy (as claimed) as her children and grandchildren had used it for decades without getting wet feet. Very little vandalism happened, they said, and they were willing to look at vandal resistant equipment. They had also identified funding they could access (from a trust fund for that park) that would pay for up-keep. They tried to reason with the local authority but, when they would not listen, 'went public' by organising a petition and holding a protest that featured in the local press. They presented the petition at a full local authority meeting and won, meaning the parks teams had to keep the original two play areas. This conflict led to major relationship

difficulties, with participants saying that afterwards, key park team individuals were “a bit sore,” “in a sulk” and refused to come to meetings.

These types of situations were upsetting for the Friends because it made them feel that their opinions, local knowledge and expertise, gained through many visits over the years, were not valued. They felt they knew more about the space than the parks team, yet they were not listened to. They also felt that the parks team were not willing to consider more creative solutions to the problem, such as looking for alternative funding.

“We [the Friends] have got that opportunity to sort of think and see. I mean I walk through the park most days because I live on the other side and I walk to work through the park, so, you know, I know the park really well and I walk through it, and so I know what happens in the park when I walk through it and what I want to see happening in the park. Whereas actually the people that work there, I think half the time they never go in it! And so they don’t necessarily know, you know, what we know because we’ve got eyes and ears and... so I think that’s what Friends of bring...”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

The conflict between TBCF and the parks team, had a different starting point. Here, the CF felt that, for long-term protection, sections of the space should be designated as LNRs. This was against the parks teams’ wishes, who said it was unnecessary. This disagreement led to a long-running campaign involving having “to take the Officers on” and leading to “crazy fights” and (metaphorical) “blood on the walls” (ex-leader, interview). The CF utilised their personal connections and their knowledge of the system to lobby, eventually presenting a petition at a full local authority meeting where they won the case and it was agreed to create five LNRs.

“I knew that I had to bust that conflict open. And so we actually petitioned the full Council so as a result of that there was considerable publicity the full Council heard (..) who was our Chair at the time and he presented the petition formally, verbally to full Council and that broke the log-jam and the councillors were directed to cooperate with the designation of these five LNRs.”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

The leader, who had previously worked in the local authority, understood the park teams position, recognising that creating the LNRs would require time and resource from an

already depleted department. However, he thought it was important to press ahead, to 'ignore' these concerns, as otherwise initiatives like this would never happen.

"they are the guys who have to come in every morning, they have got a lousy budget which they are expected to actually convince [city's] people generally that they are able to look after all the parks and countryside without any problems at all, that's what Jo public out there, in their ignorance expect. But unfortunately periodically they adopt a negative stance, instead of sitting down and basically saying how can this work? How can we make it happen? Because at the end of the day, for us to win that battle, putting it very bluntly, we had to actually ignore the fact that it was going to cost some money into the future to keep looking after it."

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

Lack of appreciation / respect

Not feeling sufficiently appreciated or respected by the parks teams emerged as a strong, more abstract, theme amongst some case studies. Participants talked about how the parks team made them feel like a nuisance, as opposed to the asset they were trying to be. The Chair of Wilde Meadows, for example, in an interview described coming to the realisation that the parks team did not take her seriously.

"I just feel, well, they must see my name and think 'Er, it's her again' [slight laugh]. ... I just feel that maybe they've not ever taken me serious anymore, you know"

This feeling had crystallized when she unexpectedly, whilst out litter-picking, came across a celebration event for the green space, organised by the parks team. A local councillor was there, along with the parks team and the local press, but she had not been invited. What particularly irked her was that most of the attendees had had little involvement with the space, whereas she had spent years advocating for it. It was almost, she said, as if they were wanting to upset her.

Similarly, anger over the lack of appreciation the parks team showed to the Friends, despite their considerable efforts to improve the park was expressed in another case-study.

P [...]it should be 'wow' you know. I mean look at Emma and myself, you know. They should be biting our hands off. You know. Emma's run that flipping café and,

because of that the park has got a green flag, because it wouldn't have it without that, because you have to have a toilet.

I: And you don't get thanked or anything...

P: Well, it's not about being thanked, it's about, you know, acknowledged I think and just, rather than viewed as a bit of a pain in the arse because I'm sure that's what [parks team contact] thinks I am a pain in the arse, I know. And I have been to him. But it's just like, you know, why? Because actually you know here we are, because of the networks of connections we're probably getting about half a million pounds to sort the park out⁷!

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

Taking credit for work the Friends Group had been responsible for, was another common complaint. In one case study, the local television news ran a story about some park improvements featuring the parks team, without mentioning the Friends Group who had raised the funds. The leader decided to remain silent, yet it clearly irked him and contributed to feeling not appreciated.

Negative attitudes towards the Friends Groups

More broadly, some participants had concluded that the parks teams did not like Friends Groups, as a concept. One related how, at a meeting, a senior person had said;

"if we knew you were going to cause us all this work, we'd never have set Friends Groups up in the first place".

⁷ This relates to a successful joint bid that was being applied for during the data collection period. Subsequently the park received large-scale improvements from this.

(Friends of Norton Park, co-leader, interview)

This greatly offended the participant, who emphasised how much funding they had brought into the park, and how little they asked of the local authority.

Reflecting on her decision to end the group, another participant, said she had come to realise that fundamentally the parks team, both at a senior and local level, did not like Friends Group. She had been warned about this at the beginning by another long-standing Friend.

“I mean John has always said that he thought [the parks team manager] didn’t like Friends Groups and he would have been happy to see us disappear anyway, so, he’s kind of got his wish eventually you know.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

After she ended the group, this had been confirmed to her by a volunteer who said that their main parks team contact *“doesn’t like Friends Groups, you know”* because *“they cause a lot of problems”* (*Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview*).

Control

A few participants, who had been involved in community activism for over two decades, felt that local authorities generally (and parks teams particularly) were reluctant to engage with community groups as they wanted to be in control themselves. One called this *“control freakery”* saying this was a long-term issue, particularly for the political party who was in control of the local authority where he had operated.

“this goes back, it is endemic within the Labour Party, the Labour Party finds it very difficult to move away from having tight control over things.”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

Similarly, the Chair of Friends of Hardy Rec, said, in an interview, that local authorities tended to be *“semi-hostile to community groups... because they don’t like people challenging their decisions”* and this was especially true of parks teams.

“Parks had always been very much, “Park Rangers, they run the Parks, there’s no need for any community say whatsoever.””

It was recognised that things had started to change. Local authorities were, it was felt, now more supportive of community groups and involvement in general, though, despite

the rhetoric around community engagement, some still found it hard to share power. There was also cynicism regarding their motivations; two participants emphasised that this willingness to engage with communities was not a fundamental change in beliefs but a practical response to reduced resources. This chimes with the idea of instrumental participation, presented in Chapter 4.

“I think that they’ve got a totally mercenary approach to voluntary groups these days. They see them as absolutely essential for the simple reason that they can’t meet the aspirations of their own constituents to the degree that they previously could easily do. So that voluntary groups are seen as absolutely essential in covering the lack of resources both financially and staff-wise.”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

“I mean I might be being a bit cynical but I do feel that all this push about ‘People Can’ and ‘Friends of’ and stuff is really because the money has run out and, you know, that’s disrespectful in a sense. It’s like last resort, now we’re having to come to you because we haven’t got anyone to do it anymore, so you can do it. But they’re not equipping us.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

Officers’ main emphasis, it was said, was on how voluntary groups can fulfil their own priorities, as opposed to listening to what communities themselves wanted.

“I think they are more supportive, but they’re more supportive nowadays on quite a sophisticated basis. If you actually go in with an organisation and some resource you can bet the bottom dollar that the principle even very senior officers of the department are made aware of that and they are rapidly looking at the list of their own priorities and seeing how that can fit in.”

(TBCF, ex-leader, interview)

In one case, community participation was felt to have decreased over time. Using Hart’s Ladder of Participation (Cornwell, 2008) as a prompt, the Chair of Wilde Meadows said how, previously (when TBCF was involved) participation was towards the top of the ladder ‘Citizen Control’ but now it was far lower, at the ‘tokenism’ level, with the local authority formally consulting but not changing what they did. The language used by the Chair was illuminating, with connotations of power, control and hierarchy. She described how a senior member of the parks team had been “*very rude*” and “*slapped down*” a Friend at a

public meeting – and she had been “*put in place*” by them. Later, in Chapter 9, these findings will be compared to conceptual understanding of participation and control but here, the emphasis is on participants’ perceptions.

Perceived differences

Fundamental differences in the values of the two types of organisations and how they operated were felt to be at the heart of many disagreements.

Parks teams, participants felt, were driven by process, whereas Friends Groups focused on outcomes. They would seek a change to the park, for example, and become frustrated when this could not be achieved. Friends Groups said that they thought and behaved creatively, focusing on how something could be achieved, whereas the Parks teams were more bureaucratic.

“The guy from the council had said it must go through our procurement scheme. And it’s like, you know, they just, they’re just inflexible. And they’re not creative. And they’re.. I think the issue that I have with local authorities is that that this austerity for them is a completely new experience whereas the voluntary sector, we’ve been used to having to scratch around for money forever. And so we are much more creative, we’re much more cost effective and we’re much more on the ground. And local authorities aren’t. They’re so sort of distant and expensive and they don’t always spend the money in the right way and they just work in siloes. And you know, they could learn a lot but they don’t.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

Another difference was that whilst Friends Groups were, by definition, focused on their particular park or green space, the parks team had a regional emphasis. The validity of this was recognised but, at the same time, a strength of Friends Group was their local focus.

“P1: We know what’s happening here, the council haven’t got a clue, they haven’t got a clue.

P2: I mean we know we’re not the only park, there are other parks, prestigious parks but...

P1: Not as prestigious as ours.

P2: I know!”

(Friends of Norton Park, leader and secretary, focus group)

Friends were, they said, motivated by their love of and deep attachment to the space whereas, for the parks team it was 'just a job' and finance / money issues were the focus.

"The Chair said how having a Friends Groups means there is a "heart to it". They love the park and are focused on it – as opposed to [the local authority] who look after all green spaces in the area and are doing only what they are contracted to do.

(Friends of Gaskell Park, case study narrative)

In Wilde Meadows, many examples were given of the local authority prioritising money over nature and showing a lack of care. A contract for cutting the ancient meadows was issued by the local authority, without restrictions, meaning that against best-practice, they had been mown before the flowers had bloomed. An organised wildflower-walk on National Meadows Day, led by a local authority employee, arrived to find the meadow mown and no flowers left. Various other examples of their perceived lack of care (e.g. flaying a hedgerow / mowing a verge containing bee-orchids despite emails asking them to delay) left the Chair close to tears. She summed up this difference in values by comparing her motivation with that of senior managers.

"When it comes down to it, all I'm bothered about is the meadows. (laughs) And no other agenda than that. That other people maybe, [the parks team] has, I don't know, I don't know, whether they do or not."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, Chair, interview)

The consequences

These relationship difficulties greatly affected participants, causing stress and anxiety. One Chair described her relief when, after dissolving the group, she no longer had to engage with them.

"When she does end the group, she says it feels like "a cloud has lifted". I ask why – and she says because she no longer has to deal with the local authority."

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

Part of the reason for this stress is that Friends felt they lacked control when dealing with the local authority, unable to affect decisions or act without their agreement. This was challenging for such action-orientated people, keen to see improvements and caring passionately for their park.

"I: Are there any negative sides, in terms of impact on you, not just you, but the rest of the team?"

P1: I find it can be, it can be quite stressful, certain things [others agreeing], if things are out of your control, yet you are desperate for something to be done, like the local authority. We know that café needs knocking down and a new café, and we're within an ace of having it done. And it just needs a little push from local authority to get it over the line....

P2: it's dragging on and dragging on."

(Friends of Norton Park, joint leader and secretary, focus group)

The difficulties led to feeling disillusioned and frustrated and this, in turn, could lead to them deciding to leave or end the Friends Group. Only one case study had actually ended during the study for this reason (Chapter 7, 'ending'), but others said that it was only their stubbornness and determination that had prevented them from doing so (Chapter 7, 'personal qualities'). One experienced leader observed that, operating in a challenging environment puts off most community groups; some may survive, but only the minority.

"P1: Community empowerment relies on a number of factors, I believe, I think that, obviously it depends on the strength of the community, and your vision and, initiative and willing to be assertive and, you know, but it also depends on getting positive feedback... I mean, you know, it can be done in a hostile environment, but it is much more difficult..

I: From the local authority do you mean?

P1: Yer, I mean it might put off 90% of groups if it's a hostile response"

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

Another consequence of these difficult relationships is that the two organisations start to operate independently from each other, which is likely to lead to inefficiencies. In Gaskell Park, the Friends Groups decision to stop inviting the parks team to meetings meant two organisations were operating in the same space, with limited communication.

Potential ways of improving the relationship between parks teams and Friends Groups were suggested. Making parks and green spaces a statutory duty⁸ for local authorities was suggested by some. Currently, it was felt local authorities are aware they are not obligated to do the work, resulting in less resources, attention and oversight.

“I think if parks were a statutory duty for the local authority their attitude would be different. They know they don’t have to do it.”

(Friends of Norton Park, joint-leader, focus group)

Wanting to have influence and to be listened to, were consistent themes across Friends Groups. They wanted to be able to have a conversation with the parks team and be able to affect their decisions, to influence them. Related to this is the desire to feel appreciated and be respected.

“And one of the things is we don’t want money, like from the council, I’ve mentioned earlier we don’t want money, we want influence.”

(Friends of Norton Park, joint leader, focus group)

“I think there’s been a lack of respect really of our commitment and our passion and our vision. Um. But I don’t think any of our group want to run the park. But we do want our work to be acknowledged.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

As per the quote above, there was no evidence of Friends Groups wanting to manage the green space themselves. This, it was felt, was the role of the local authority, despite all the difficulties. One participant, who had launched a particularly excoriating attack on her local

⁸ A 2016 petition, called on the government to make it a “statutory duty for local authorities to protect and maintain the country’s 27,000 public parks ”received over 180,000 signatures.

authority, expanded on her reasoning for this, saying that Friends Groups are not representative of the whole community and they lack accountability. In addition, they fluctuate in terms of their membership and activity levels. Fundamentally, she felt, parks, as a vital local resource, needed to be managed, not by volunteers, but by an accountable, representative body with paid employees.

“You know, what you can expect people to do on a voluntary basis I think, you know, I mean, I’m sort of with the Unions here in terms of, you know, volunteers should not be doing what people were paid to do, just because we’ve [the local authority] run out of money. Um. And you know, as a Friends of Group, what we should be able to do is influence and be respected.”

(Friends of Gaskell Park, Vice-Chair, interview)

A couple of exceptions in terms of consequences existed. TBCF, as described earlier, had a very combative relationship with their parks team. However, the lead appeared to be relatively unaffected by this, almost relishing the disputes and their victories over the parks team. In part this was due to his previous experience and personal qualities, as described previously (Chapter 7, ‘personal qualities’). He had been a senior local authority officer, a trade unionist and was assertive and confident. He also lived some distance from the green space, so could step away when he chose. In contrast, the leader that took over (the Friends of Wilde Meadows) was very adversely affected by the difficulties, due to her lack of confidence and status plus, as she lived locally, she could not leave.

Potentially these two differing experiences with the parks team could be connected historically. This is difficult to assess fully, as asking these questions of the parks team would have jeopardised anonymity. However it is possible that the negative attitude displayed by the parks team in 2018-20 (when the Chair of Wilde Meadows was involved) could have resulted from their difficult relationship with the CF in 2003-2014, when they had lost various public ‘battles’. This could indicate that difficult relationships between communities and parks teams can be ‘passed down’ from one group to another, over time.

“Whilst this [the battles between the CF and the Parks team] had happened sometime ago, it is possible that this led to resentment, which was being vented onto the new, less powerful, Friends Group.”

(Friends of Wilde Meadows, case study narrative)

To summarise this domain so far, these findings clearly demonstrate how problematic the relationship between Friends Groups and parks teams can be. From the perspective of the Friends, there were high levels of disagreement and conflict, leading to frustration, anger and inefficiencies. These difficulties led to stress, anxiety, a loss of control and disillusionment. The Friends perceived that the organisations operated fundamentally differently. Whilst they tended to focus on outcomes and work in a creative, informal way, the parks teams were more bureaucratic and process orientated. Motivations also contrasted, the Friends tended to be driven by an emotional connection to their local space, whereas they saw the parks teams as being more financially and regionally orientated.

Building collective responsibility

One case study was an outlier. The Friends of Hardy Rec and the local authority co-manage the park, deciding everything together. There is clear trust between the organisations, built up over many years. The case study narrative describes their relationship as being “*very equal – with power and responsibilities evenly shared.*” Unlike the other Friends Group there was no evident long-standing anger towards the local authority; any disagreements and frustrations had been dealt with constructively and not become major rifts. Uniquely, as described earlier, this case study contains the perspectives of the Friends Group and the local authority, both of whom emphasised the importance of working together, as a partnership.

“The critical point is always seek to work on the basis of partnership, rather than conflict”

(Friends of Hardy Rec, member, paired interview)

A number of contextual factors were identified. The first was that the local authority had a positive ethos towards community engagement generally. As described in Chapter 7 ‘starting out’, riots had taken place in the neighbourhood and this has led to the recognition, within the local authority, of the importance of working in partnership with communities. A second contextual factor was that, in the early days of the Friends Group (pre-austerity) the local authority, particularly the neighbourhood teams, had had the resources to invest in building a relationship with them, and this had lasted to this day. The availability of Lottery funds for parks, also meant there was an incentive to work together. Community engagement was a necessary part of the bid process, encouraging the parks team to work with the Friends Group and, once the bid had been successful, the

local authority was contractually bound to commit a certain level of resource to the park and to maintain it at a certain standard, thus reducing tensions between them. A final important contextual factor was that, within the local authority, there was an influential individual who recognised the potential of the Friends Group and decided to work with them. His seniority meant he had the autonomy to do this and, once the lottery bid had been successful, there was wider support within the organisation.

“Well, actually, frankly, it was cause I was a very senior officer within the department that was working with him, and I was really into the idea and saw the potential. And nobody was going to stop me, because it was only at the point when, you know, we had become successful, with the first round of the HLF and, (...) were on the verge of doing a multi-million-pound improvement that the wider council started to get very positive.”

(Friends of Hardy Rec, member, paired-interview)

There was therefore a positive environment for the relationship to form. In addition though, both organisations put a great deal of care into maintaining this relationship. The success factors for this, as perceived by the two key participants, are described next.

Being a strong, assertive Friends Group, who would not be ‘pushed about’ was important. The group had clear *“red-lines”* that they would not cross and they asserted their right to work with the local authority on an equal footing *“we wouldn’t have accepted any other way [of working] anyway”* (Chair, paired-interview). This principle was established early on in their relationship when they refused the local authorities’ suggestion of putting huge amounts of rubble in the park from a nearby building project. This they agreed, ‘set the tone’ for the relationship and led to the local authority realising they could not behave in a top-down way, imposing their ideas on the Friends. Instead they had to work together.

“after that there was no top-down parachuting in ideas, it was all like, let’s work out what we want, how we’re going to achieve it and how we’re going to do it together”.

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

Understanding each other’s viewpoints, and the difficulties they faced, was critical. The Friends Groups spent time with the local authority officers, listening to them, and therefore understood the challenges they faced. This was balanced by the local authority respecting the Friends Group and the work they did. Choosing to work collaboratively together, and not escalating disagreements, was part of this. One incident, a potential conflict relating to

water quality, illustrated this. When the river, as part of the park regeneration, was 'de-culverted' it revealed major problems with the sewerage system. Years of mismanagement meant wastewater from a school (and other buildings) was going directly into the river, causing a stink. Rather than go to the press and escalate the situation, as some people thought they should, the Chair refused, instead liaising directly with the local authority to try to resolve it together. This was in recognition of the fact it was a long-standing complex issue that was challenging to fix.

"people were arguing we've got to go public, we've got to start, you know, going to the press and all that. And we were saying that, you know, we shouldn't have to do that, because we're taking collective responsibility"

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

Whilst it was important therefore to be assertive and have 'red-lines,' thinking carefully about long-term consequences of actions, understanding the issues local authorities face and being conciliatory when needed was also key.

"it's a relationship, it's two-way, they need to learn about how to work with the community and the community needs to know how to work with the council in a constructive way, whilst still lobbying or shouting and screaming when necessary."

(Friends of Hardy Rec, Chair, paired-interview)

Other success factors identified in this outlier case study include regular meetings to maintain on-going communication. This investment of time helped maintain the relationship and reduce misunderstandings, that could otherwise result in conflict. Any plans had to be presented and agreed, so the parks team knew what was going on, and felt more in control. Focusing on solving problems and keeping politics out of the room was also identified as important.

This case study demonstrates that, if there is the right contextual environment (a positive ethos and available resources) and both sides are willing to work together in a respectful, appreciative and considerate way, it is possible to build a more positive relationship and share power and control of the space. And, importantly, this was associated with being a very successful Friends Group, with less associated stress and anxiety.

Councillors

Elected councillors were a far less frequent topic of conversation than the parks teams, though when they were mentioned, fairly negative opinions emerged. A common criticism was that they were focused on self-promotion and their own agendas, as opposed to having a genuine interest in improving the local green space. Councillors were accused of taking credit for the work of the Friends Groups or trying to push the groups in a direction they did not want. One had kept trying to encourage a group to renovate some dilapidated greenhouses, for example, despite it not being their priority and not having the capacity to do it. Being too closely aligned to party politics, and therefore not always acting in the local area's best interests, was another common sentiment. Practically councillors were said to often be unreliable and change too frequently. One participant said that, whilst it was important to have councillors on side, it was best to keep them away from day-to-day decisions, so the Friends Groups and local authority officers could focus on improving the green space. Councillors who did listen to what the Friends Groups wanted and advocated for them, were praised. These individuals were felt to be less focused on party politics and more on genuinely wanting to improve the local area.

The local authority perspective

This next section reports the findings from interviews with local authority parks teams, giving their perspective on working with Friends Groups. It starts by giving some background context, before describing their perceptions of Friends Groups, their role working with them, common issues that arise and their thoughts on how relationships could be improved. Broader themes of control, diversity, deprivation and inequality are also presented.

Participants

Seven individuals from four parks teams participated in this phase of the research. See Table 8.1. All worked regularly with Friends Groups, albeit in different roles. Two worked in 'development', responsible for new initiatives or improvements within parks. Two worked as 'partnership managers', responsible for areas such as income generation, fundraising or supporting Friends Groups. Another two had operational roles, responsible for day-to-day maintenance whilst one managed the outreach service, encompassing the

ranger service and education. All had worked in parks and green spaces for a long time, ranging from 10 to 35 years.

Table 8.1: Local authority parks team interview participants (all anonymised, with pseudonyms).

Local Authority⁹	Individuals¹⁰	Roles	Data collected
Wheaton Northern city in England	Rachel	Outreach Manager (Parks and Countryside)	Face to face interview
Utterley Northern city in England	Rebecca Matthew	Partnership Manager Area Officer (Parks and Countryside)	Paired face to face interview
Malbry Metropolitan borough, North-West England	Sarah Roger	Green Spaces Development Officer Parks & Cemetery Manager	Two individual face to face interviews
Radstowe Northern city in England	Stuart Elaine	Parks Technical Manager (development) Partnership Manager	Paired face to face interview

Three of the local authorities (Wheaton, Utterley, Radstowe) were based in the same cities as the Friends Group case-studies. Malbry local authority was selected as an additional participant as they had a very positive working relationship with Friends Groups, acting as advocates for this style of working. Roger had a particularly close relationship

⁹ The names used for the local authorities are fictional.

¹⁰ Names anonymised – gender kept same.

with one award winning group (Friends of Malbry Cemetery) that is often used as an example of 'best practice' in the sector.

Context

A wide variety of roles exist within parks teams, many of whom may have contact with Friends Groups, albeit for different reasons. Groups would talk to maintenance or operational staff, if there was an issue with day-to-day aspects, but the development team if they wanted to discuss a new or improved facility. These different teams did not always have positive working relationships with each other. One participant, for example, said there were tensions between the outreach team, who had a more environmental focus, with staff trained in conservation, and the maintenance staff who had often been worked in parks for a long time, and could be reluctant to change their way of operating.

"we've got staff, we're really good at retaining staff. So a lot of the staff who work in parks, have worked for parks for 20 plus years. And so they have just been used to cutting that grass every two weeks between April and September and that's just how they've done it, and, they have their own ride-on mower and that's their route. And that's, that's just the job they love but, but, so it's that education side of things that we need to...."

(Wheaton, Outreach Manager, interview)

Other teams within the local authority may also have contact with Friends Groups, including community, neighbourhood or housing.

Large budget cuts had had a huge impact on the parks service, especially those in cities. One participant (Radstowe) described being "*absolutely hammered*" by these cuts, losing over a third of their budget in recent years ("*60% in real-terms*"), ranger numbers had reduced from over 30 to under 10, and their education team had been "*wiped out*", something they described as "*tragic*". Another had lost two thirds of their budget since austerity, with gardener numbers reduced by nearly 40%. Any remaining staff had to perform routine tasks, as they could no longer afford to maintain areas in different, more specialist ways.

"P1: We've gone down from 120 to 75 gardeners

P2: And losing skills and experience, not necessarily skilled horticulturists now, because they're just having to cut grass.

P1: If you can drive a mower you can have a job

I: Right, so the grass cutting dominates in terms of..

P1: Well, if you imagine 20 years ago, you'd have your green keepers, the bowl greens, cricket fields, fine turf... (P2: Specialists) You'd have your nursery staff, you'd have your specialist gardeners, those that knew how to look after plants, because obviously if you want a herbaceous border it's different to a rose garden, different shrubs. So, you know, we had specialist people, those skills are gone and we now just have generic gardeners."

(Radstowe, Technical Manager and Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Parks and green spaces had been re-designed to need less resources, or, as one person said, they had stopped doing the "nice stuff."

"Um, a lot of the kind of, the ornamental shrub beds or the traditional planting are gone, (...), er, but it's just a case of almost re-designing the park that needs less attention."

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview,)

Not being a statutory service meant parks had been disproportionately affected by budgetary cuts (Chapter 1, 'park management'). Statutory service budgets such as social care (which account for a large percentage of local authority spending) cannot be as heavily reduced, meaning the burden falls on non-statutory areas of work. What exacerbates this situation is that many tasks within parks remit, have to be done for legal purposes e.g. safety inspections of play equipment and tree maintenance or for reputational reasons e.g. maintaining war memorials, meaning other parts of their remit are even more squeezed.

The loss of staff, the reduction in specialisms and the declining quality of the service they offer affected morale. Participants tended to be very business focused during interviews, however the cuts had clearly affected them personally, causing sorrow and sadness.

"P1: We aren't doing the level of horticulture that we would have done before, and we don't have the people that would have looked after it anyway

I: So as a horticulturist by background, does that upset you that you can't do that anymore?

P1: Oh, massively, you imagine you've spent 30 years building something up to watch it being dismantled because people won't pay for it. It's incredibly upsetting."

(Radstowe, Technical Manager, paired-interview)

A further pressure is that parks are important politically within the local authority, with elected members (who officers answer to) often advocating for their local green spaces to receive attention and thus resources. Plus, green spaces have a role in many different council agendas, for example, health, youth, loneliness, meaning they get pulled in many different directions.

"If you think about green space, green space is such a neutral space so you could actually, if there was a roomful of people, everybody might have a different idea about what their green space means to them. And... so there's national agendas and there's local agendas, we can almost tick every box, you know, health and wellbeing, youth, or great outdoors, (...), you know if you think about education, isolation, absolutely everything, we could actually hang our hat on, so we do get pulled in lots of different directions."

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

The parks teams also have a large number of different types of parks and green spaces to manage. One local authority, for example, managed a handful of major parks, over 50 community parks, nearly 100 recreation grounds, over 100 allotment sites and nature conservation areas, hundreds of km of rights of way, and dozens of cemeteries/crematoriums¹¹. To prioritise many had a structured system involving an overall green space strategy and individual quality assessments. From these, projects are planned and resources allocated across teams, often years in advance. This, one

¹¹ Exact numbers not included, to maintain anonymity

participant said, helped impose 'discipline' so when questions were raised re a particular park and the resource it receives, they can justify their decisions. Despite this approach, there was still, at times, political pressure to re-prioritise and move particular projects up the list.

"There is stuff that just comes at us like a curved ball. Somebody will put something in the mix – there might be emergency repairs – or there is the pressure of local councillors, so politically we might need to do something. And that's just another layer of you know community consultation in some ways, it's something that's come from the community, a local councillor feel it's been missed or it's significant and that needs moving up the priority list which, you know, happens, that is not a problem. And then we'll just have to move things round a little bit, re-jig."

(Malbry, Development Officer, interview)

Pressure on parks teams therefore comes from many different directions. Severe budget cuts have led to substantial reductions in staff numbers and skills, leading to green spaces being managed in low maintenance ways, with less diversity, less content and less 'nice stuff'. Staff morale has been negatively affected, as they manage this decline. The demand however, from local politicians and communities, for good quality green spaces remains high, as its role in many agendas becomes increasingly recognised.

Benefits of Friends Groups

The benefits that Friends Groups brought to parks and green spaces were widely recognised. A park with an active, successful group could "*buck the trend*" in terms of declining standards. One substantial benefit was that they could access funding pots that local authorities could not. This was often the main motivation for authorities to try to set up groups where there was not one. Some groups received donations from the local community (e.g. plants, bulbs, stone etc), that otherwise would come from local authority budgets. A second major benefit was that Friends Groups could do the maintenance tasks that local authorities no longer had time to do. This particularly applied to the 'icing on the cake' activities e.g. planting flowers or holding events, that elevated parks to being pleasant, welcoming environments.

"Yer. Well I think considering our massive budget cuts over recent years from central government, erm, we can't afford to look after the parks as well as we have

in the past and so therefore the work of the Friends Groups is invaluable because they do all sorts of jobs that we just don't get round to."

(Wheaton, Outreach Manager, interview)

Friends Groups helped with consultations by providing reach into communities, increasing responses. Their physical presence in the parks helped residents feel safe, given that local authority staff were unlikely to be in situ.

"P2: Yer, one of the things that they, people always say to us, "oh you should have the park wardens and you know, park gardener, you know" people based in the park. So the Friends Of are based in the park, they might not be the Council, but they are people in the park. You know on a regular basis."

(Radstowe, Technical Manager, paired-interview)

Many of these benefits could, arguably, be delivered by well-funded parks teams. However, some benefits, recognised more by the enthusiastic supporters of Friends Groups, arose because it was the community that were more involved. By having 'ownership' of the space, the wider community were more invested in it and wished to protect it, meaning there was less anti-social behaviour.

"So in that sense, it helps the borough because there's an ownership there. We don't see as much vandalism because of that. You still get the odd idiot but you don't see as much. The minute you can put ownership into something then straightaway you've got a community spirit that wants to protect that asset. And that's exactly what this is all about."

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

An active Friends Groups brought great energy, enthusiasm, creativity and passion to the space.

"Just the fact that you've got that passion about your green space, we need that"

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Friends Groups can use their passion, and their voice, to influence senior local authority members. As representatives of the community, it was felt their voice was more powerful and more listened to, than that of the officers.

"You cannot close your ears to these people, at the end of the day, they are [pause] I don't say a great weapon [laughs] (...). If I went on my own to my Chief

Officers and said, 'Look, this is what I want to do' I mean apart from reports and goodness knows what else, and the issues around it, it will be years before it gets, because the way things in local authority are, they change priorities daily. So you want to, but when you've got a group of volunteers, Friend Groups, who are political activists as well, you know, I mean some of them are councillors, you know, so there are elected members are some of these. Erm, they tend to have a bit more pushing power when it comes to convincing Chief Executives."

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

Perceptions of Friends Groups

Attitudes towards Friends Groups ranged from enthusiasm and admiration to more reluctant acceptance.

Genuine enthusiasm for Friends Groups emerged from two participants (Roger, Malbry and Rebecca, Utterley, categorised as 'more enthusiastic supporters' from now on) who emphasised their passion, and their commitment, saying they were "*absolutely brilliant*". Both said the best part of their job was working with these groups and that they had formed personal connections with them.

"They know, you know, and, they blow me away, when I, I, do go to some Friends of meetings, but I do try to contain it to the Forum, and it's the best thing that I go to. They absolutely blow me away now because they're the ones that say, "yer, well actually we'll come over and help you then on Saturday, we'll come and help you plant that" (..) and the wellbeing from that..."

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Roger from Malbry had been converted to working with Friends Groups. Initially, when the idea was mentioned to him, he had been reluctant, seeing them as too difficult to manage, "*You're having a laugh!*". However his experience of working with the Friends of Malbry Cemetery had converted him and now, his priority was the Friends Groups.

"I would, if I ever left [local authority] and went working somewhere else, the first thing I'd be asking in an interview would be 'How many Friends Groups have you got?' 'Who are they and I want to meet them'. (...). Absolutely brilliant."

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery manager, interview)

Both these participants recognised that working with Friends Groups did bring issues and they needed to be managed (see later) but overall their perceptions were positive.

More uncertainty was displayed by other participants who, whilst they appreciated the Friends Groups, tended to emphasise the difficulties more. Sometimes a patronising tone would be used, for example, saying they behaved like “*headless chickens*” or needed lots of “*hand-holding*”. One local authority displayed more reluctance and had only a grudging acceptance of their role, tending to talk negatively about Friends Groups and emphasising the difficulties they experienced.

“I: Talking of Friends of Groups I was going to ask you, erm, sort of how, what are your responsibilities, what do you do with Friend Groups, how do you work with them?”

P2: Erm

P1: Try not to! (laughs)”

(individual not identified to preserve privacy)

Many of their stories were about abrasive characters, ‘falling out’, not being trusted and being accused of ‘lying’. They gave examples of one-upmanship when they had been ‘right’ and the Friends Group ‘wrong’ (some not included for reasons of anonymity).

“We worked with one group [pause] a couple of weeks ago who’d gone out and had an individual who’d said they’d put a zip wire in, they’d buy and install a zip wire, so I went to the meeting, erm, and I just said “heh, this is the sort of thing we could have” and you could watch this guy’s face drop, he said “We thought it would be about £1000.” “nah, fifteen and a half, and that’s the smallest you’ll get for £15,500. The one you want you’re looking at £20k, is your friend still going to pay for it?” “No.”

(individual not identified to preserve privacy)

Their acceptance of the role of Friends Group felt quite mercenary, tending to be directly related to their own depleted resources and the declining quality of the spaces.

“It’s just less, the quality is less, the standards are less, erm, and it shows, I’ll be quite honest, it shows. But we’re going away from that Victorian ethos of everything being pristine and keep off the grass, to not having that, but the balance

might not necessarily be right. (pause) Hence why we have Friends of Groups! [laughs]

(individual not identified to preserve privacy)

'Good' vs 'difficult' groups

All participants said some Friends Groups were easier to work with than others. Aspects of 'good' or 'positive' groups, as they were sometimes called, related both to their skills and their attitudes. Having organisational skills, understanding the system and how things worked and the ability to handle bureaucracy were all valued assets. These types of skills, participants felt, meant that groups were able to formalise, operate reasonably independently and fund-raise.

"Skills, practical skills is one side of it, but it's how you organise a group because yer, when you first set up you've got to have all the paperwork haven't you? You've got to set a bank account up, you've got to have people in post, and a lot have shied away from that, they didn't want to be that formal, but if you want to apply for funding you've got to be that formal, so it's having the right people with the right capabilities to do that."

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

'Hands on' groups were especially valued. These would take on practical tasks, do them in a 'sensible' way that would not cause extra work whilst keeping the local authority informed.

"A shining example, one of the groups I've got will say they're going to do a parks tidy up this week, can you provide us with some bin bags to put all the [inaudible] in, and then, when they're full, we'll come and pick them up for you, just leave them there. They can pretty much take care of themselves."

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview)

Their attitudes or orientation were a key difference between 'good' and 'difficult' groups. The former would be described as open-minded and willing to engage constructively with the parks team, working in partnership. The latter, by comparison, were seen as closed-minded or "*blinkered*". Some were described as "*anti-council*", unwilling to work with the parks team, whatever they tried. They would complain about the service they received and unfavourably compare this to other parks.

“Well, recently, after many years of fighting against the [inaudible] we lost a group, they just folded one day. And I think, I inherited them in a really angry state, everything I ever did was not good enough, er, and then the kind of parting shot was to kind of send an email in, saying how rubbish we were. And when you’ve [inaudible]. What can you do with that? You just try to move on from it really.”

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview)

Receiving complaints from Friends Groups either directly or via other routes (e.g. petitions) was something all participants had experienced. There was an acceptance that this was part of the job, and to some extent inevitable, however regret or upset did emerge, with a couple saying it had made them reflect on their handling of the situation and whether they could have done anything differently.

“when they go to the Press, when they do make a stink about something, we do have to look at our self and think ‘have we made a mistake?’, you know, and you do have to think, could we have done this differently?”

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Others were more defensive and clearly irritated, tending to blame individuals in the Friends Group.

“And the Friends of Chairman said “that is absolutely blatant lie, there has never been a [removed for anonymity reasons] on that site, blah, blah, blah” [He acts putting the picture on the table]. “There’s the picture.” So they had the reverse blinkered view.”

(individual not identified to preserve privacy)

In some cases they had not been able to establish a positive working relationship with a group. In such circumstances they might wait for key individuals to move on, hoping this would change the mindset of the group, or start working with a different group in the area.

Issues causing relationship problems

A number of issues working with Friends Groups emerged, the most common relating to maintenance and sustainability. Groups would have ideas for projects that would impact on maintenance, thus affecting parks teams workloads. One group, for example, planted trees without telling the parks team, affecting their mowing regime, increasing the time it

took. Installing ponds, zip wires or play-parks were popular suggestions from Friends Groups, that, if implemented, impacted maintenance.

“Some of the ideas they have are extremely, erm, exciting, but we might not be able to fulfil their wishes. Erm, not only from a funds and resources perspective but also for long term maintenance, we might not have staff who are skilled to look after a particular facility that they want to install. Erm, and I think that frustrates groups, erm.”

(Wheaton, Outreach Manager, interview)

The sustainability of the Friends Groups was relevant as participants were worried that they would install something new, promise to maintain it, only to fold. The responsibility for maintaining it would then fall onto them. This irritated the parks teams and made them wary.

“I was forever being told ‘don’t worry, the Friends Group have created this but they will maintain it, you don’t have to touch it’. Two years later the Friends Group have dissolved, and we end up with it. And it causes upteen.... The cost then is astronomical! We’ve got to try and make them.... It’s not maintained, we get criticised as a local authority for not doing it.”

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

To prevent this, it was necessary to discuss any new ideas early on, so those that might affect maintenance were stopped. Often, they would suggest alternatives that could fulfil a similar remit but require less ongoing maintenance e.g. boulders to play on rather than swings, wildflowers rather than a pond.

“Er, let’s put a pond in. It’s no, because the maintenance is absolutely horrendous. We understand the environmental impact’s great, but we can’t maintain it or keep that pond safe. Let’s have a look at some wildflower meadows instead and try to get them down that road”

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview)

Unrealistic expectations as to what parks teams could deliver was another common issue. Groups would become frustrated, and sometimes complain, if projects were delivered slowly or maintenance standards were lower than expected. This was attributed to expecting service-levels to be the same as they were before austerity, when parks teams had more resources. This was most common in established groups with older members,

newer groups, set up since austerity, tended to have a greater understanding of parks teams limitations.

“There’s still been tricky conversations with some groups even though they have been established for a long time because they do expect a lot from us, but they have more and more recently had to get less and less from us because we just can’t do it, we don’t have the resources...”

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Similarly groups often lacked an understanding of the processes parks teams had to follow and the constraints they were under. Procuring equipment was one such example. Whilst Friends Groups may be able to source an item cheaply, parks teams had to follow a tendering process and ensure certain standards were met. It was acknowledged that this process could be frustrating but, as a local authority, they had to act in accountable, fair and transparent ways.

Having to deal with challenging individuals was an issue for most participants. Some Friends were described as being “*vocal*” or “*demanding*,” expecting the parks teams to respond rapidly to their request and believing those who shouted the loudest would ‘win’. Others were described as being “*rude*” or “*abrasive*”. One team said this was especially an issue amongst ex-professionals who expected to be able to do whatever they wanted “*they can’t understand why they can’t just do what they want to do*” and needed to be “*moulded*” to work with them. The two Utterley participants emphasised the need for respect, they addressed any rudeness directly, pointing out it was unacceptable, whilst also trying to build a personal connection. They had a quiet confidence about them, if a person still chose to complain they would accept this.

“P1: It is about building up that respect, I mean, you know, at times, you just sort of say “I’m sorry, if you’re going to speak to me like that I’ll put the phone down” and then you repeat that and you put the phone down. We are, we are supportive.....

P2: If I get a nasty email I’ll often phone them and say “I’m in the park tomorrow, let’s just have a cup of coffee” “Don’t send ten emails and scattergun it to everybody” (P1: Chief Execs), “let’s have a look at it. And then if you’re not happy, then send your email.”

(Utterley, Area Officer and Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

One final issue raised was that sometimes different community groups operated within the same park e.g. a Friends Group and a sporting organisation, and there could be clashes

in terms of their vision and preferences. In one park, for example, the Friends Group had had a dispute with the bowling green association. The local authority would then need to mediate between them.

Many of the issues described above led to participants feeling they were always having to be negative, to say 'No' or limit what the groups did.

"We do feel like the bad guy definitely. Yer, yer, it's hard. Especially when they are so enthusiastic and you don't want to knock that enthusiasm, erm, so it's a difficult balance between, erm, you don't want them to then go off in a huff and not come back as a Friends Group either you know, you want them to be there"

(Malbry, Development Officer, paired-interview)

All were clear however that it was part of their role to manage and control what was done in these publicly owned green spaces. This is discussed more later.

To summarise, parks teams perceived Friends Groups as being beneficial in terms of maintaining and enhancing the space, in place of paid parks teams, helping residents feel safe and, due to increased community ownership, reducing anti-social behaviour. They were seen as bringing passion, energy and creativity to the spaces and as powerful and effective advocates for it. Their perceptions of Friends Groups ranged from admiration and enthusiasm to a more grudging acceptance. Parks teams preferred to work with groups with good organisational skills, a willingness to be 'hands on' and those that had an open, positive mindset towards working with the local authorities. Common issues working with Friends Groups included their projects affecting maintenance regimes, having unrealistic expectations of parks teams' abilities and not understanding their processes. Individuals that were overly demanding or rude also negatively affected working relationships.

The role of local authorities in terms of Friends Groups

The role of local authorities, from their own perspective, in regard to instigating, supporting and managing Friends Groups is now discussed.

Setting up

The parks teams had a fairly limited role in instigating new Friends Groups, tending to be reactive rather than proactive. If there was a 'vocal' group of residents, for example, they would encourage them to formalise so they could access resources. This was often done via community or neighbourhood teams who would help them with constitutions, bank accounts, policies etc. One participant felt they should be more proactive in instigating new groups, however, their one attempt to do this had been unsuccessful. A park that lacked development funding had been identified, so they tried to engage the community via leaflets, social media posts etc. This worked initially, with residents coming to meetings, but it failed to flourish due, they felt, to the parks team lacking the time to support them in the early stages and not having the local connections.

"I: Do you get a sense of why that is, of why it's been difficult?"

P: I think a) because of the lack of help from ourselves, I think we could have put more time into it, but we just didn't have the resources, so resources really. Erm, and b) yer, that lack of buy-in from local groups and perhaps ourselves now knowing who it is we need to go to, so, we aren't out on the, out in the area, we're not community based."

(Wheaton, Outreach Manager, interview)

In Radstowe, the parks team had previously been involved in encouraging residents to form Friends Groups. Now however, due to resource constraints, they tended to respond to demand or expressions of interest from the community.

The main exception to this was in Malbry. Whilst, in general, they did not instigate the formation of Friends Groups, they had done so in one green space. This locally important cemetery was in a very poor, uncared for, state. Initial attempts to set up a Friends Group using conventional methods e.g. organising meetings / distributing flyers had been unsuccessful. Removing the gates however (unbeknown to the community, just for repair) provoked a strong and indignant community response. This led to a connection being made between the parks team and a well-connected local individual who offered to set up the Friends Group. This rapidly became an active committed group, that went on to win many awards.

On-going support

Providing tangible resources and practical help with tasks was a common form of ongoing support. Examples include providing skips to remove debris or installing benches that the Friends had fund-raised for. The parks team would provide guidance or ideas to the Friends in terms of how they could spend any monies they had raised. In one example, a Friends Group wanted to plant some trees. The parks team identified a suitable venue, suggested planting fruit trees and gave technical advice on plant choice. The Friends then planted 200 apple trees. All participants said they tried to steer groups towards projects that would not impact substantially on maintenance. Giving health and safety advice and information was also common.

Thinking of ideas, or mini-goals, to keep the Friends Groups motivated and engaged was a tactic of one local authority (Malbry). The Parks and Cemetery Manager tried to understand what motivated them, and then thought of ideas that would fit with this. He realised the Friends Group were very interested in local history so found out about a historical event affecting the cemetery, and encouraged them to create a garden around this theme.

The amount of on-going support given by the parks teams, especially in terms of attending Friends Group meetings, varied considerably. Most participants said that, whilst they acknowledged the importance of regular contact, time constraints, and the fact that meetings tended to be outside normal work hours, meant they did not attend as many as was optimal. In Utterley, the Area Officer used to attend every Friends meeting but, after his area was expanded, he had had to reduce the frequency of his attendance. In Wheaton and Radstowe the parks team only attended if there was a particular problem or project to discuss. All agreed however that not attending meetings regularly meant misunderstandings and frustrations were more likely to occur.

“P2: Just to focus on the Friends of Groups could have that, as I said before, build that relationship and would be, on a more regular basis, rather than ad hoc, as it is now. We tend to have to react to something they’ve done, or they are reacting to something we’ve done, you know, we can’t attend the meetings on a regular basis,

P1: Well they are evenings, the majority are evenings, so you can’t you know..”

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager and Technical Manager, paired-interview)

To endorse this view, one of the ‘more enthusiastic supporters (Malbry) repeatedly stressed the importance of attending Friends Group meetings. The manager went to every meeting of his preferred group, even if they were in the evening or at weekends, to keep

them 'on track'. Senior managers in the local authority supported this, allowing staff the flexibility to attend.

"And this is the crux of it because Friends Groups can be more time consuming than your standard staff, erm, and I have not missed a Friends meeting at [place] in 3 years. We have them every month. And I volunteer myself to go and assist and help them when they do various projects. So in a sense erm you're going beyond what you're expected to do as a local authority employee, but that's the only way you can do it. You've got to be able to dedicate that time."

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

Parks and green space forums had been set up to support Friends Groups in two of the participating local authorities, Utterly and Wheaton. These were regular, in person events where groups could network, discuss issues and receive information from the parks team. Both participants were very positive about the forums, saying they helped dispel any misinformation and encouraged connections between groups.

"[the forum] has been a fantastic move forward because it's a place that all the Friends can get together, network, erm, and discuss, and obviously find out what we are doing strategically, so, our Senior Managers, our senior team often attend and give them information on how the strategy is going and our initiative going forward. And that, some Friends Groups really appreciate that. And it's like giving them the time that they perhaps haven't felt we've given them in the past."

(Wheaton, Outreach Manager, interview)

In Utterly, the forum was set up when the local authority could no longer support each group individually. The ambitions for the forum were that it would encourage a shift in mind-set, whereby, rather than relying on the local authority to deliver, groups would take on more responsibilities themselves and support each other. To encourage this, the local authority facilitated the forum, rather than the local authority. Whilst the Partnership Manager attended every meeting, they tried to be there as an enabler, not as an expert.

"[The forum is partly] for them to realise that actually it's not just about what the council's doing, it's actually about well, it's your neighbourhood, what are you doing? So it's been a real sea-change for a lot of them to think differently about, well, the council always did it, well, actually the council won't be doing that anymore so what are you going to do?"

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

In addition, the forum aimed to encourage groups to think 'holistically,' beyond their own green space to the city as a whole, and to support each other, sharing expertise and resources. Whilst this had taken some time, it had begun to happen. One capable group, from an affluent area, had started to help a less confident group from a more deprived area who were struggling with resources. Groups were also sharing expertise with each other, both informally and via facilitated discussions on common issues, such as how to recruit more volunteers.

Another positive but unexpected outcome from this forum, was that unrealistic expectations of the local authority were being challenged by other groups, they had started to “*self-regulate*”. One individual had been “*demanding*” increased grass-cutting, favouring a very neat formal look. Instead of the Partnership Manager having to respond, another Friends Group had challenged her view, saying it was better for nature to leave the grass longer. Messages tended to be better received from another Friends Group, rather than the local authority. Relationships between the groups and the parks team had also improved as a result of the forum, with the Partnership Manager saying she was no longer ‘The Council’ but ‘Rebecca’.

Appreciation

Giving the Friends Groups credit for the work they did was identified as very important by the more enthusiastic participants. Making sure any press releases, for example, led with their contribution, rather than that of paid staff members was seen as an important way of sustaining morale and “*elevating*” the Friends within the community.

“I was at the opening of the memorial garden, but I made sure that every press release that went out through our media it was down to the Friends Group. You know, with the support of [named] Council, never [named] Council have done this with the support of the Friends Group’. And I’ve always made sure that they get the credit for everything they’ve done. Even though there may be jobs that my staff have done.. (...) That’s fine. (...) That’s not what we’re in it for. So it’s so important that you give them the credit [spoken with emphasis].”

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

Related to this was the importance of thanking Friends Groups and showing the local authorities' appreciation. The two more enthusiastic participants held events for the Friends Groups, hosted by local dignitaries, to thank them. They also made sure that they thanked them personally and sincerely, even when trying to steer them in a certain direction.

"So what you are actually constantly saying to them "you're great, thanks so much, you are absolutely fabulous, we really need you and this is the direction that we're going to try and sort of steer the tanker into going because actually when we are going in that direction, collectively, it's fantastic." And that's, so it's not, the "thank you very much, stuff off" it's the "thank you very much, because you are great, and you are valuable"

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

These 'softer' aspects of the local authority role were less evident in the Wheaton and Radstowe participants, though the importance of providing tea and biscuits to volunteers as a thank you for their time was mentioned by one.

Skills development and training

There was very little evidence of formal training for Friends Groups. One participant said that, if there was a specific knowledge gap e.g. how to plant a wildflower meadow the parks team would help them. Other than that, they were *"intelligent people"* and would develop many skills themselves. The one exception was in Utterley where the forum was used to deliver information or training, and encouraged groups to share expertise and knowledge.

Similarly, there was no evidence of the participants themselves being trained in how to work with community groups or manage volunteers. Such training or information was said to *"probably"* be available as part of the local authorities performance and learning (or similar) packages but that required identifying a training need and then accessing it, something none of the participants had done. Instead, they relied on innate skill-sets or working knowledge developed during their time at the local authority.

"I: Does the council ever do any training in how to deal with, sort of, volunteers or communities? Maybe not with yourself but with your teams you know?"

P1: I'm sure there are all sorts of things if you go looking for them

P2: (...) we've all been around for so long!"

(Utterley, Partnership Manager and Technical Manager, paired-interview)

Role limitations

The parks teams avoided becoming involved in internal disputes within Friends Groups such as individuals falling out, or members wanting a change in the committee. They would advise on process and direct them to the constitution but, other than that, it was seen as something the groups needed to resolve themselves.

In summary, the parks teams role involved providing on-going support, including practical help, resources and knowledge. Demonstrating genuine appreciation for their efforts was also important. Forums helped establish connections between groups and prevented misinformation spreading, in one case helping shift the mindset of groups away from reliance on the authority to supporting each other. There was less evidence of training or skills development, either for the Friends Groups themselves or the parks teams. Park teams involvement in setting up new groups was, despite recognising its importance, limited.

Establishing a positive working relationship

This section presents participants' perceptions of how best to establish a positive working relationship with Friends Groups and the barriers preventing this.

The main consistent theme that emerged, was the need for improved communication and understanding. Communication, from the parks team, needed to be honest and respectful. Whilst the local authority did have to communicate difficult decisions, especially in terms of limiting Friends Groups ambitions, they needed to do this directly and openly, giving reasons and presenting alternatives. They also needed to listen more to groups and be available for questions. This, they said, would improve Friends Groups understanding of their position and ultimately lead to improved trust between the organisations.

"They have great ideas and actually when, a lot of the time, if you can... [pause – thinking] It's not about saying no, well it is, it's about saying "No, but this is the reason", the alternatives, and I think this is what, this is what we do on a constant basis, without even thinking about it. The council isn't here to say no, if we say no

there is a reason, and by going to the groups and by having this liaison, what you can say is “actually no, that idea, no, we’re not doing that”, but these are the reasons why, and this is the alternative and let’s focus on that.”

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

“I will always listen before I comment and I don’t tell them what they can and can’t – I will always listen first. And it’s so important that you do it, you’ve just got to have that open mind and you’ve just got to give them the respect that they deserve.”

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

Communicating information, or correcting misinformation, quickly, helped ensure frustrations and irritations did not grow.

“[Going to meetings regularly means] you can kind of nip things in the bud. “Why is our border empty this winter? Is it because of funding cuts?” “No, it’s being treated for chickweed. It will be planted up in April.” And they go, “oh, no”. It’s Chinese whispers, “why have you done that? Why have you left that?” “It’s weeds, it’s covered in weeds.” “It’s not weeds, it’s wildflowers.”

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview)

The parks teams with the most successful relationships with Friends Groups had managed to build a personal connection with them, breaking down some of the barriers between the organisations. They had done this by emphasising their common ground, or shared aims and the fact that they were people, not just representatives of the local authority, responsible for the whole organisation and current situation. This had played a role in allowing them to move from a combative, challenging relationship to working together in partnership.

“Like I said, for me, I get more enjoyment now out of my job supporting Friends Groups as part of my core work than I did before. And I’ve got some wonderful friends in the borough now which I didn’t think I’d ever have.”

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

“Yes, in fact one of them said to me, something fabulous the other week, they said “You are our 12th committee member” and I just thought actually, what more can I ask for?”

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Lacking staff time

There was common agreement that the main barrier to establishing a positive working relationship was a lack of resources, namely staff time. Participants would emphasise the sheer number of groups in their area (85 in one case), compared to the number of staff. Building a relationship with each and every one was therefore not possible.

“Staff time more than anything. Erm, yer, just a bit more staff time I think if we could. Just to help more with them because I think it’s quite a small team we’ve got, like 50 potentially 50 on our books, it’s quite a lot of groups.”

(Malbry, Development Officer, interview)

This lack of time meant it was not possible to work proactively, addressing issues as they arose. Instead, they were responding reactively to situations, by which time miscommunications and frustrations had developed. The fact Friends Group meetings were often in the evening or at weekends exacerbated this.

“Just to focus on the Friends of Groups could have that, as I said before, build that relationship and would be, on a more regular basis, rather than ad hoc, as it is now. We tend to have to react to something they’ve done, or they are reacting to something we’ve done, you know, we can’t attend the meetings on a regular basis.”

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

This lack of time also meant that staff were only able to work more intensively with a small number of groups. “Preferred” groups, often consisted of those they saw as capable, were in flagship green spaces, or with whom they got on well. They would also feel they had to engage with more ‘vocal’ groups who used protest or political ‘clout’ to make their voices heard. Groups that did not require much support but behaved ‘sensibly’ were also favoured. Building capacity or supporting groups that were struggling or lacked abilities was rarely mentioned, and when it was, it tended to be seen as the remit of the community or neighbourhood teams.

Other potential strategies to improve the relationships, suggested by participants, included:

- having a dedicated role within the local authority to support Friends Groups, so they had one person to go to, rather than different teams.
- Staff having the flexibility to attend meetings in the evening.
- an allocation of funds to every Friends Group. This would make a big difference to them but be small-scale relative to overall budgets.
- working more closely with other local authority teams, particularly community or neighbourhood, as they had community connections and the skills to develop groups.
- Forums for Friends Groups – these were seen as a positive way of supporting groups, even by those local authorities who did not currently have one.
- Having terms and conditions (or partnership agreements), including what a group could or could not do and what would happen if an initiative was not maintained

Establishing a positive trusting working relationship therefore depends on improved communication from the parks team (including listening to them) and building understanding within the Friends Groups. This involves having respectful, honest and timely conversations with groups and, where possible, building a personal connection. The lack of available staff time, for reasons described in 'context' earlier, is a substantial barrier to this.

Control

Who is in control of the green spaces, whether that is the local authority or the Friends Groups, was discussed. There was general agreement that the parks teams needed to control and manage parks and green spaces, as ultimately, they were responsible for them. This included the activities or work that took place there, as well as health and safety aspects.

"P1: We have to be careful that they [Friends Group] don't feel that they can just dictate..."

P2: They don't decide policy

P1: They'd like to and, of course, we'll consult with them, all the things that P2 and I have said, but however, there's also the fact that we have to have an overview for green space.."

(Utterley, Partnership Manager and Area Officer, paired-interview)

The degree of control, how absolute it was, however varied. One local authority participant felt they needed to have almost complete control of the spaces. The only scope for independent action for Friends Group was maintenance tasks and, letting trusted or 'sensible' groups hold events without informing them (though a booking system monitored this).

I: how do you try and navigate decisions about the park, I mean, who has the power in the relationship?

P1: We do (laughs) P2: Well..

I: Do you feel you do?

P1: No we do!

P2: Ultimately as the landowner we do yer

P1: We have to pick up that liability (P2 agreeing)

P2: And be liable for it while it's in there for instance, insurance that children, you know if there's an incident in the park (P1 agreeing). So we've got to ensure...

I: So how much do you let them do without consulting you? Is there a sort of a line in the sand?

P2: Nothing. We don't want them to do anything without them consulting us.

P1: On development side, maintenance side it depends [on abilities of the group]

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager and Technical Manager, paired-interview)

More scope for independent action was allowed by others. They might, for example, allow groups to undertake small projects without the parks team input, as long as they were reversible (e.g. new flower-beds) as well as maintenance. Terms and conditions were agreed so it was clear that if these were not maintained or became unsafe, the local authority could remove them.

A more nuanced and less absolute view was evident with one participant. Whilst he also believed the local authority needed to manage and control what happened in the spaces by working closely with them *"if we're going to have a Friends Group it's got to be managed, you know what I mean, there's got to be an element of control"*, he was also willing to share control and make decisions with groups.

“The way this works is, as far as I’m concerned, they are in control. However, I have a responsibility as an Officer for the authority to keep control, if you know what I mean. They have control but I have to keep control. That’s the simplest, the simple way of looking at it.”

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

One example he gave was of a Christmas tree that a Friends Group used to fundraise. It was their idea, he sourced it and got it delivered, they decided where it went and how to decorate it and then used it for fundraising (via decorated baubles). Overall, he was prepared to listen, discuss and help, but he would also impose limits, or say no, if necessary.

A tentative pattern emerges here. The latter participant, whose approach was the most collaborative, believed that it was the community that owned the land, the local authorities’ role was to look after it for them.

“Whenever I meet anybody that walks into a park, or walks into a cemetery, I always say “This is yours, this is your back-garden, this is your asset, it’s not mine, I just look after it for you, this is yours, you want to do something with it, let me know.””

(Malbry, Parks and Cemetery Manager, interview)

In contrast, the participants with the most absolute approach to control, used language to imply that it was the local authority who owned the land. They called themselves “landowners” and said, about the Friends Groups;

“we can’t just let them run loose, because then we’re responsible for that land, it’s on our land”

(Radstowe, Technical Manager, paired-interview).

This difference in language potentially suggests that the willingness to share / cede control (or not) could be associated with beliefs about ownership. If the parks team see the land as ‘theirs’ they are potentially less willing to share control, whereas if they see it as belonging to the community, they are more willing to do so. This is discussed more in Chapter 9.

To summarise therefore, there was agreement that controlling and managing the work of Friends Groups was necessary. However, there was variation in terms of how total this

control should be and where the limits lay; how much could be ceded to Friends Groups and how much needed to be retained by the Council. Attempts to share control were emerging.

Diversity and deprivation

Two broader themes are now presented. The first relates to the diversity of groups and how closely, or not, they reflect the wider community. The second focuses on deprivation, and whether, in the opinion of the park team participants, that affects the prevalence and success of Friends Groups.

Friends Groups, participants said, tended to not reflect the wider community in terms of key characteristics, notably their age, ethnicity, and social class. Most groups, although there was the occasional exception, were comprised of older, often retired, middle-class/professional, white people.

“So they are largely retired, largely white, there’s very little representation in terms of different ethnic groups, and sometimes that can become a little bit “this is what we want” therefore this is what you’re going to get and actually I don’t care what anybody else....”

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Friends Groups preferences and priorities for the green spaces therefore did not always fit with the whole community. The main example given was that of age. Whereas the Friends Group might choose to focus on aesthetics / planting, parents of young children were likely to prefer play-equipment and teenagers might prioritise having somewhere to socialise. Holding events in parks could cause problems as, despite being enjoyed by many people, the Friends often resented the damage caused to the park.

“You know, they might now, they don’t reflect what the young people might want to have in a park, cause they’re all retired professionals who want to see, who want to see it used in a different way.”

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

This disconnect, at times, caused issues for the local authority, as they had a responsibility to ensure the space was developed in a way that was suitable for the whole community. This entailed having “awkward conversations” with groups at times, as they tried to act as mediators.

“But we’ve got to be advocates for the whole demographic of the park users. So we’re, you know, we might be seen as negative because we say “you can’t do this, you can’t do that” but we can’t just have a Friends of Group that might be half a dozen people saying “we want this” cause actually the wider community might not want. So we do encourage them to consult and speak to the wider community whenever we are trying to do something in a park.”

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

The second broader theme relates to deprivation and inequality, and how Friends Groups vary between different types of neighbourhoods. This topic was always introduced by the interviewer, never by the participants, who thought carefully before answering, giving the impression it was not something they had previously considered.

Deprived areas in general, one participant said, tended to receive less capital investment in their parks. This is because most comes from developers who have to pay towards community / social infrastructure when building new developments. As most developments are in affluent areas, and the funds have to stay within the ward, deprived areas receive less. To counterbalance this slightly, one local authority said that some health-related funds were being spent on green spaces in deprived areas, as their role in promoting health was becoming more recognised.

Affluent areas, it was generally felt, tended to have more Friends Groups (though there were some exceptions). When one participant was asked if this led to different standards in different parks he replied unequivocally; *“Yes, of course it does, of course it does.”*

There was also a difference, most participants said, in how groups in affluent areas, compared to those in deprived places operated. Groups in affluent areas often quickly understood what they had to do to improve their park and were able to organise themselves. They had the skills, experience and confidence to raise funds. They were also more likely to *“pull together”* and be willing to work collaboratively with the local authority. These are all characteristics associated with ‘good’ Friends Groups, as described earlier in this chapter.

“What you get in the more affluent area, you get a [pause], I’m generalising here, you do tend to get a little bit more, erm, they will probably on the whole, tend to be more, they get to a point more quickly where they tend to be self-supporting. So, you tend to get people that are a bit more [pause], you know, they’re Doctors... (I: more professional backgrounds?) Yer. So that they’re used to sort of filling out

funding applications, you know, and, I'm trying not to sound like some sort of There is a disparity across the city and a lot of it is to do with skills and experience, and about confidence. So, in the [more affluent] South of the City you would tend to get "Oh, well I'll write a funding application then for that". I mean I'll get Friends of Groups [park] is a classic, where they wanted a new playground, and within about five minutes there's a whole committee set up including a Press Officer and a...[pause] Because they are confident enough, articulate enough to do that funding bid, without even telling us that, you know?"

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Groups in deprived areas, most participants said, needed more support or “*hand-holding*”. Their mindset was also different, often having an expectation that the local authority should deliver services for them and were less likely to realise, or accept, that they needed to take some responsibility for maintaining / improving their park. Some participants phrased this quite carefully, trying not to blame community members.

"I think, in the more deprived areas there is more demand for hand-holding [speaking slowly and carefully]. More sort of, "you're the council, you provide it" Erm, Nanny state, "it's always been there for us and we don't want to accept that actually maybe we're going to have to take some responsibility". I mean the message I'm always hitting home with is with green space, it's collective responsibility, there's no such thing as council and public anymore, that's gone. If you don't do it, who is going to do it? You know, you live here. If you don't want to do it, then it won't be done, we've got to take that collective responsibility...."

(Utterley, Partnership Manager, paired-interview)

Others were more critical, appearing to blame or judge. They talked about Friends Groups in deprived areas being more likely to demand or complain and being reluctant to take action themselves to improve the park.

[The two participants are relaying a conversation between themselves and people in a deprived area who are pointing out the poor state of their park compared to others]

*P1: "Why don't you pull together as a group and do something with your park?"
"Oh no, I won't bother"*

P2: "No, I'm not doing that, we'll just complain"

(Radstowe, Partnership Manager and Technical Manager, paired-interview)

“P1: I think the approach is entirely different. I think at [affluent park] they’ll say “can we help raise funds for a couple of bins, we’ve got enough money for one, can you help us get money for a second one”, some of the other sites are like “how come we haven’t got a bin, put me a bin in” (...) [He mimes banging the table] “we’ve got nothing here” So we’ll say, “look, yer if you speak to your elected member they might have some (inaudible) funding available which you can access as a group and we can’t” And they’ll say “Why should we do that?”

(Utterley, Area Officer, paired-interview)

The need to tailor support and information to differing needs was emphasised by one participant. She recognised that groups in deprived areas did have assets and skills but they were more likely to struggle with certain aspects, particularly writing bids, and that the onus was on the local authority to deliver that information in a way that did not exclude them.

“They all want different support. I think it’s sort of maybe the support and how you make sure you tailor it. There was one group of ladies we had who, really really active ladies, really good at doing stuff on the group, but when it came to bid-writing, there was certain things, especially when it came to literacy, that they maybe struggled with. And that was, that might be something to do with, maybe, and that was to do with their education where they were up to. And it was being sort of mindful of that when we were sending them stuff. Or when we were trying to engage with them actually. I can’t change, I can’t change that. Equality I suppose. But I can support them to make sure that we can make sure they can get the same service, or they’ve got the same access to stuff that other Friends Groups have.”

(Malbry, Development Officer, interview)

Overall therefore, parks teams perceived that Friends Groups were not always reflective of the wider community and they therefore had to help ensure broader community needs were considered. The issue of inequality was not something most participants had previously considered, though, when they did, it was acknowledged that affluent areas tended to have more Friends Groups better able to take responsibility and operate effectively. Groups in deprived areas were seen as being less positive about working in

partnership and to need more support. Some recognised this could be because of circumstances or education levels, whilst others had a tendency to blame.

Conclusion

This chapter presents findings on one important topic, the relationship between Friends Groups and parks teams, from two contrasting perspectives. Both perspectives contain a range of experiences that enable common issues and potential solutions to be identified.

Fractionous, difficult relationships between these two types of organisations emerged strongly and frequently. A myriad of negative consequences, affecting both organisation types, ensued from this, including frustration, anger, stress, disillusionment, upset and loss of morale. Public conflict was not uncommon. Friends can feel unappreciated, not respected or listened to, even disliked, and these feelings appear to have some veracity, when viewed from the perspective of the parks teams. Parks teams have experienced drastic and demoralising cuts, whilst demand for their services is ever growing, affecting their morale and the quality of service they can deliver. Some appear to accept the involvement of Friends reluctantly, tolerating them, only out of necessity. Patronising attitudes and a desire for them to 'conform' emerge from some parks staff. Differences in how the organisations tend to work also emerged. Friends talked about local authorities being rigid, bureaucratic and process-driven, whilst parks teams see these as being necessary parts of their job, that Friends are unwilling to conform with.

Within both perspectives however, examples of positive relationships between Friends and park teams emerged. Working constructively together, in partnership, led to many beneficial outcomes, both for the individuals concerned and for the spaces. These were characterised by mutual respect and appreciation and were built upon understanding each other's circumstances, developing a personal connection and investing time in building these relationships. A lack of time for parks staff to do this, along with a lack of skills and training, serve as barriers. Optimistically, one example, showed it was possible for parks staff to move from seeing Friends Groups as 'problematic' to being essential assets, vital to the work of the local authority.

Power and control emerged as more abstract themes. Many Friends Groups sought greater control of the spaces, whilst parks team could be reluctant to relinquish this, leading to many of the tensions described. This could potentially be linked to views on 'ownership' of the spaces. Power 'battles' were fought. Strong groups used their ability to

galvanise public opinion, their knowledge of local authority decision making mechanisms and connections to senior figures to exert influence, whilst parks teams countered by utilising their position as gatekeepers to resources, and their ability to make decisions about land-use. This chimes with the idea of a “*dance of power given and taken all at once*” cited by Popay et al. (2021). Establishing collaborative partnerships was associated with recognising the need to relinquish some control to communities (to a varying degree) and to share power, by working constructively together focused on outcomes, without one organisation dominating the other.

One substantive issue that emerges relates to inequality, with parks teams recognising, on reflection, that affluent areas are more likely to have effective Friends Groups who are able to advocate, fundraise and therefore improve their green spaces. Those in deprived areas require more support but, currently, parks teams are not equipped to provide this, lacking the time, knowledge, skills and connections to do so. This is discussed more in the next chapter.

Chapter 9: Discussion

This chapter seeks to answer the aims and objectives identified in Chapter 1. It discusses how and where this study's findings concur with existing evidence and understandings (Chapters 2 – 4), and where they differ. The main emphasis is on new or additional insights gained, focusing on those aspects that emerged as especially important. These lead to a series of recommendations for stakeholders (Chapter 10). First though the study's strengths and limitations are discussed, along with potential transferability.

Strengths, limitations and transferability

A strength of this study is that the approach utilised led to rich, in-depth understanding of the Friends Group phenomena. Using ethnographic principles (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) of building a rapport and conducting the research in a naturalistic way, led to trusting relationships being formed with participants, and subsequently greater insight being attained. The longitudinal aspect enabled the experiences of developing groups to be seen, and felt, in real time, leading to more authentic understandings than briefer visits could have provided. Whilst participants may have had a desire to portray 'their side' of the story originally, maintaining this over-time, with a trusted contact, is more difficult, thus increasing the finding's trustworthiness and authenticity (Amin et al., 2020).

Having a sample that varied in terms of success and experiences was advantageous, allowing key themes and concepts to be explored via alternative lenses. Similarly, including the perspective of park teams, hearing about their attitudes to Friends Groups and the challenges they faced, helped 'balance' the findings, providing a counter-narrative that enhanced the understanding of the whole situation (Bryman, 2008). The flexible approach taken to data collection meant unanticipated aspects of the phenomena could also be explored.

Deciding to analyse the data as individual case studies, utilising narrative accounts, meant each case could be understood, in context, aiding trustworthiness (Mason, 2008; Amin et al., 2020). The rigorous analysis process allowed for patterns and explanations across cases, to be identified. The fact that some initial 'hunches' and theories were discounted, whilst other more novel ideas emerged as 'explanatory', highlights the veracity of this approach. The analysis process as a whole, ensured higher-level concepts were able to emerge, generating meaning from the large quantities of raw data (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010; Mason, 2018; Miles et al., 2019).

One limitation was that exploring ethnicity (in relation to Friends Groups) was challenging. Despite some groups being in ethnically diverse areas, participating Friends tended to be white British, therefore they lacked the direct perspective of ethnic minority people. When ethnicity was discussed, participants often appeared uncomfortable, being notably cautious with their language and what they said. Gaining an understanding of the role ethnicity may have in how groups operated, and how that might interact with other characteristics such as class, or potential barriers to involvement for ethnic minority people was therefore difficult. Exploring this aspect of Friends Groups in future studies is therefore important, possibly involving researchers from ethnic minority communities or linking with community groups. This would build on Haqqani's study (2022).

A second limitation is that the data collected tended to focus more on group leaders, as opposed to other, more peripheral, members. Whilst they participated to an extent, generally informally, intended focus groups with these participants did not progress. Hearing more from them would deepen understanding regarding group dynamics and the impact of involvement on them.

The transferability of the study's findings can be actively debated, based as they are on seven individual case studies, each with individual traits, features and circumstances. The consistency of key themes across cases and alternative perspectives, including 'outliers' adds weight to the argument that there is transferability of the findings from these cases to the phenomena more broadly. This would appear strongest for Friends Groups in disadvantaged areas; those in affluent areas may have quite different experiences. Including the local authority perspective aided transferability as they were able to give a city-wide perspective, going beyond individual groups.

The role and remit of Friends Groups

Objective 1 was to develop an understanding of how Friends Groups are involved in maintaining and improving green spaces. This study found that they undertook a wide range of varied activities and there was a good 'fit' with the roles and responsibilities identified in the literature (see Figure 2.1), incorporating both place-making and place-keeping activities, civic and physical tasks. The idea, from asset-based approaches, of community members using their 'hands, hearts and heads' (Hopkins and Ripon, 2015) to contribute strongly resonated, with Friends using their skills, passion, time and knowledge to benefit the space.

There was less reticence than expressed in the literature, in doing tasks previously seen as within the parks teams remit. Many of the more 'hands on' groups accepted that to maintain the space's quality, they needed to perform certain routine tasks, such as litter picking, planting etc. This relied on having a group of active volunteers and understanding the pressures that parks teams were under. In keeping with the literature, this study found that Friends Groups did not want to manage the space, believing it should remain under local authority remit, as stable and democratic institutions.

The need to tackle anti-social behaviour, especially fly-tipping and vandalism, emerged as a stronger theme in this study, compared to the literature. All groups had experienced high levels of this type of negative behaviour, impacting on communities' perceptions of the spaces and their willingness to engage with Friends Groups. This acts as a 'vicious' circle, as responsible citizens avoid the green spaces and are less keen to engage with community efforts to improve the space, leading to more anti-social behaviour. As this study is not comparative, it is not possible to assert that this is a bigger issue in deprived neighbourhoods compared to affluent ones, however it does fit with the 'negative pathway' identified by Whitehead et al. (2016) whereby concentrated disadvantaged environments lead to neighbourhood disorder. Greater obstacles to engagement therefore appear to exist in deprived areas compared to affluent areas. Some groups, particularly those with skilled, confident and persistent group leaders, had had success dealing with these issues, transforming parks from effective 'no-go' zones into thriving, popular spaces. This had led to far less anti-social behaviour, and when it did occur, it was swiftly dealt with. Other groups, particularly newer ones or those with leaders lacking the aforementioned resources, struggled with this issue and repeated anti-social behaviour led to disillusionment. Support from authorities to help tackle these issues in deprived areas is key and needs to be happen early on, to prevent demoralisation. Friends Groups can provide invaluable assistance by acting as 'eyes and ears,' as role-models within the community and helping prevent issues via awareness raising. Encouraging them to act as 'vigilantes' however, as some Friends Groups do, seems unwise. Once the tide of anti-social behaviour is reversed, and local people start to use the green space more, in a positive way, the amount of anti-social behaviour diminishes.

Advocacy, lobbying and activism emerged as strong themes in this study. Nearly all participating Friends Groups undertook this role, often running vigorous, long-term and, at times, gruelling campaigns to influence authorities' decisions and actions. Whilst this aspect of their role did feature in the literature, the extent of their activism, as revealed in this study, appeared far greater. Jones (2002a) says that one concerning aspect of

Friends Groups is that, rather than reducing the resources required from authorities, as anticipated, they increase it due to their campaigning. Findings from this study concur, whilst Friends Groups do many of the tasks authorities used to undertake, they also still need input from them, albeit in different ways (e.g. installing facilities they have fund-raised for or supporting bids). The stronger, more assertive Friends Groups are particularly adept at drawing in resources from park teams via their campaigning and knowledge of the system and their rights. Lee (2018) identified that one unique aspect of Friends Groups was their independence, and this enabled them to protect the green spaces they cared for. Given threats to urban green spaces, this aspect of these groups appears ever more critical.

Friends Groups volunteering style is therefore not passive or about maintaining existing structures, as some volunteering theories assert, instead it fits more closely with the political science view that volunteering can lead to communities collectively organising and asserting their rights (Hustinx et al., 2010). Whilst most Friends Groups operated within the limits of what was permitted, some more assertive groups were prepared to push boundaries, acting, at times, in subversive ways, to reach their preferred outcome. This suggests their mode of operation, at times, has similarities with guerrilla gardening, shifting their position in Figure 3.2 rightwards. This has implications for local government practice and policy as it cannot be assumed that Friends will 'comply' with local strategies, or that their involvement will reduce required green space budgets, though the type of input will change.

The individual ethos of Friends Groups emerged from this study. What groups choose to focus on varies and is heavily influenced by the interests of the group leaders, and, to an extent, key members. Overt discussions about their 'vision' for the space rarely occurred, but what they acted on reflected their core values and concerns which might, for example, be about community, play, nature, or something more specific. Following their own interests energised and enthused groups, leading to ambitious, often creative, ideas. Partners and authorities who sought to discover what groups were interested in, and then developed ideas or tasks that aligned with that, tended to develop positive, productive relationships with them. An interest in local history for example led to a themed garden being developed. In contrast, efforts to encourage groups to focus on something they were not enthused by tended to be less successful. Generating a list of tasks, to fit their strategy and then asking expecting Friends Groups to complete them, as one local authority did, is unlikely to motivate or enthuse groups. This approach appears logical to the parks team and is in keeping with 'instrumental' participation (Cornwall, 2008) but

does not fit with how Friends Groups operate. A volunteer-led approach, more aligned to transformative participation, appears more likely to lead to positive working relationships.

Friends Groups as innovators appeared in both this study and the literature. Aalbers and Sehested (2018) identified that citizen involvement in green spaces could lead to radical and inspiring developments, beyond what authorities thought possible. Similarly, in this study, Friends Groups thought creatively and ambitiously, outside convention e.g. partnering with night anglers to reduce anti-social behaviour. Attempting to limit their role to menial tasks frustrated them as they wanted to be part of something bigger, to leave a legacy. This ties into their passion for the space that is a key benefit of involving Friends. Encouraging and empowering other groups to use the space was an important, previously less discussed, part of their role. This tended to involve more established Friends Groups helping smaller less experienced groups of local citizens with aspects they found difficult e.g. bureaucracy, to run an event or an activity. They also helped those with interests form smaller sub-groups, therefore extending their 'reach' to other groups (thus improving representativeness – see later) and further promoting use of the space.

The impact on Friends of being an active member also emerged, helping answer Objective 3. The literature focuses largely on benefits for individuals (Fors et al., 2015; Husk et al., 2016) including improved physical, mental and social health from being active in green spaces, forming meaningful relationships with others and feeling a sense of belonging. Achieving something positive leads, the literature says, to a sense of satisfaction, pride and ultimately improved self-efficacy and empowerment. In this study, similar positive outcomes did occur for individuals, including the formation of strong friendships and camaraderie, a feeling of pride in their achievements and a strong sense of meaning and purpose.

Negative outcomes do feature in the literature, with Husk et al. (2016) identifying a sense of obligation and futility and Aalbers and Sehested (2018) describing the role as a "*heavy burden*." In this study however they emerge as a far more substantive issue. Frustration, anger, stress and anxiety, caused by challenging relationships with parks teams, and, to a lesser extent, anti-social behaviour, were commonly expressed, strongly felt emotions. Participants felt unappreciated, not listened to and that they lacked control, leading to disillusionment, all running counter to the aforementioned pathway of increased involvement leading to an improved sense of control and empowerment (Whitehead et al., 2016). These issues appear most relevant for group leaders who bear the responsibilities, and liaise with park teams, and is possibly less valid for those without such

responsibilities, however this needs further exploration. This finding is concerning, as an important justification for increased participation is that it benefits those involved (Fors et al, 2015). Conferring burdens on volunteers, especially those in deprived communities who could be experiencing life-struggles, feels unethical. This is especially relevant for Friends living close to the green space as they are unable to easily abandon their commitment. Assessing the scale of this issue, exploring how Friends could be better supported and, how the system could be adjusted to reduce the burden on them is therefore vital.

Finally, there is a lack of basic numerical data on Friends Groups, including how many there are, where they are based, who is involved and how much activity they do. There is also a lack of consistency in how these are measured e.g. active groups vs. all, who counts as a Friend etc. (active members or all supporters) and what characteristics are important. If policy-makers / authorities are not aware of the scale of the movement and its impact, it is unlikely they will prioritise supporting it (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). Developing consistent ways of measuring this, that do not add to the group's burdens, is therefore important. Similarly, understanding where there are 'gaps' in groups, at a neighbourhood level, is important from an environmental justice point of view.

The life cycle of a Friends Group – starting, sustaining and ending

This section answers Objective 2, exploring how groups in deprived areas form, what helps sustain their activity, the factors that help and the barriers that exist.

Many individual motivations for becoming involved in a Friends Groups exist. However, in this study what emerged as underlying these, was their emotional connection to the space; their love and passion for it. Many had positive memories of time spent there as children, or with their family, whilst others believed strongly in its potential to improve people's quality of life. Some, though not all, were driven by their love of nature. It was this connection to the space that kept Friends going when there were difficulties. This chimes with civic ecology ideas that identify biophilia (love of nature) and topophilia (love of a particular place) as key driving forces, along with memories of how a place used to be (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). Similarly, Jones (2002a) identified passion for the place as a key motive, whilst Reynolds (2008) talks about gardening being an innate need for people. Volunteering theory says that motivations for initial involvement are often value-based e.g. wanting to improve their local environment or address social injustice, whilst staying involved is often about personal benefits e.g. social connections or health (Hustinx et al.,

2010; Wilson, 2012). Study findings concur with this, as commonly, whilst altruism often prompted people to become involved, personal benefits e.g. sociability (see below) are a key success factor for groups. How people got involved, whether it was a deliberate decision or accidental, bore little connection to people's continued involvement. Some of those who had 'accidentally' volunteered, being nominated at a meeting or responding to a situation, had become committed leaders. If a new group is being planned or set up therefore, identifying individuals who have a strong emotional connection to the space, or its nature, is critical whilst also ensuring they benefit from it personally.

Factors affecting the success of participating Friends Groups were identified via the analysis process, and grouped into four key domains: people, place, process and power. This is illustrated in Figure 9.1 (see below), where, under each domain, specific success factors are shown. Please note that this is an illustration of the situation that emerged, within the deprived neighbourhoods at the time, and is not necessarily the desired one (discussed later). This model, or framework, is the first time that success factors for Friends Groups have been identified and grouped together in this way

Figure 9.1: Friends Groups success factors featuring four domains (Woodward, 2023)



People

The 'people' domain emerges as especially important. Having an effective leader was critical to success. They were often exceptional individuals, skilled, confident, energetic, committed and with a clear vision. They were also inspirational, admired and respected by other members. This aspect of Friends Groups is often over-looked in the literature, that concentrates more on systems and processes, and less on leadership and individuals. The one exception to this is Reynolds (2008) who states explicitly that effective leadership is essential for guerrilla gardening groups, yet many 'true' leaders are reluctant to be identified as such, feeling uncomfortable with the implied formality and hierarchy. A similar reticence was found in this study.

Successful leaders in this study undoubtedly possessed a degree of power. This was used to unite and inspire the group (power with and power to) and to influence authorities (power over), discussed more later. Chapter 4 helps identify their sources of power. One is that most possess a degree of 'stardom' and 'charisma' that inspired their followers and increased their level of influence (Green et al., 2015). Another source is their backgrounds. Most had had professional careers, giving them authority, connections, confidence and the ability to deal with necessary bureaucracy. One potential reason for the importance of this domain is that the groups studied faced significant challenges, especially in terms of their relationship with local authorities (see Chapter 8) and therefore they needed exceptional leaders, with power and influence, to survive. These strong leaders were able to keep going, despite the difficulties they faced, counteracting the power exerted over them by local authorities. Less confident individuals, who lacked connections and power struggled to succeed. Or, as one participant put it, *"anybody else who wasn't so (...) pig-headed would have just said, oh sod it, I'm not doing it."* If Friends Groups were operating in a more supportive, less combative environment it may be that more 'ordinary' individuals, more representative of the wider community, could lead groups successfully, reducing this domain's importance.

The topic of community leadership features in wider literature on self-organising groups, though authors conclude that it lacks sufficient attention (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007; Onyx and Leonard, 2010; Martiskainen, 2017). The style of community leadership tends towards informality and is less hierarchical than traditional models, with leaders relying on 'soft' or 'people' skills and tacit knowledge. Their role is to bring in ideas, share and discuss them with others, mobilise support and create a sense of unity in the group. They must learn from

others and adapt ideas to their own situation (Reynolds, 2008). All this chimes with this study's findings, whilst a minority of leaders were more 'top-down' or hierarchical, they tended to be less successful groups.

Seven characteristics of successful community leadership are identified (Onyx and Leonard, 2010). Six fitted with the successful leaders in this study including being embedded in the community (therefore trusted and respected), operating in an 'open system' engaging with others, shared decision making, having a vision for the future, possessing practical management skills and having commitment, persistence and energy. The final characteristic identified was having a succession plan. This was lacking in most participating Friends Groups, including successful ones, fitting with Martiskainen's (2017) conclusion that this is a key challenge. Indeed, all the surviving groups studied still had their existing leaders in place; despite operating for many (up to 20) years, none of them had successfully transitioned to a new leader. This flags up a potential issue in terms of group sustainability as, when a leader is no longer able to continue in their role, green spaces could be left without a functioning Friends Group. Civic ecology theorists argue that longevity is not always necessary, instead groups will ebb and flow over time, and rather than seeking to sustain them, this natural lifecycle should be allowed to occur. This perspective however could leave areas without good quality green spaces, negatively impacting on local residents, and therefore conflicts with tackling health inequalities or environmental (in)justice.

One implication of this, is that in order to ensure the success of Friends Groups, individuals in the community, with the potential to be leaders need to be identified and encouraged. However, as discussed later, if this is the only approach it could potentially reinforce inequality, as individuals with professional expertise, and a higher status, will tend to live in more affluent neighbourhoods, therefore affecting the distribution of successful groups. This author therefore proposes that, whilst it is important to identify and support potential leaders, it is even more important to adapt the system so there is a more supportive environment for groups to operate in, with less barriers to overcome. There needs to be an acceptance that potential leaders in disadvantaged areas may lack certain skills and need assistance developing these. This would potentially ensure a greater diversity of people, across different types of communities, can successfully lead Friends Groups.

Place

This domain highlights that the type of green space that groups operate in, affects success. This is in keeping with emerging literature on this issue that identifies that the design and

features of green space affect people's level of involvement in caring and maintaining them (Jerome et al., 2017; Fors et al., 2019). In this study being a formal, traditional park, as opposed to an informal green space, was found to improve a group's chances of success. This could reflect the fact that Friends Groups are more traditionally associated with formal parks and have a longer legacy of operating in them (GreenSpace Community, 2012; NFPGS, 2021), plus green space management and policy is often more focused on such spaces and thus groups may receive more support (Reynolds, 2008). However, in addition, what emerged from this study, is that there are some features of these parks that aid community engagement. One is the strong historical and emotional connection that local people often have with such spaces, or topophilia (discussed earlier). Another is that traditional parks include features that people know how to engage with e.g. walk-ways, cafes, points of interest. Formal parks were, after all, designed for this purpose and, whilst these features have often become neglected, they still help focus activities. More informal spaces were often left-behind areas, therefore tend to not have the same historical and emotional connections, and the features that people know how to interact with.

Friends Groups relationships with nature and wildlife is mixed, both in the literature and in this study. Some participating Friends Groups were driven by a passion for nature and were strongly motivated to improve biodiversity. Others however were focused on 'taming' the space for humans and showed less interest in the impact on nature.

It emerged in this study that people can find it easier to engage with spaces that feel ordered or controlled; the desire to 'tame' wilder spaces is clear. This is partly associated with feelings of safety, wilder areas make some people feel uneasy or worried, reducing their propensity to engage with it. This is especially true in deprived urban areas where anti-social behaviour and higher rates of crime exacerbate feelings of danger and insecurity. This raises concerns regarding the additional barriers Friends Groups face in deprived areas. What works in an affluent, cohesive community may not work in a place suffering from high levels of disorder. Such behaviour is also higher in informal green spaces, possibly because of their features (with more hiding spaces) or because of a lack of care from authorities and local people, all of which reduces people's ability to engage proactively with it.

Urban green spaces are both a resource for human health and wellbeing (the focus of this study) and for addressing environmental issues such as biodiversity-loss and climate change. Exploring how these can be balanced i.e. how urban green spaces can be designed and maintained so people feel safe and want to participate in caring for them, whilst also maximising the benefits for nature is therefore critical. One approach to this is understanding

more about how the spaces can be designed and managed to feel safe for people, whilst also being beneficial for nature and wildlife. Another is exploring how people's perceptions, especially those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, can be shifted so they are able to embrace and feel comfortable in more 'natural,' potentially less tidy, spaces. This would build on existing nature connection research (Mackay and Schmitt, 2019; Harrison et al., 2023).

In addition, whether the systems of support for Friends Groups operating in such spaces should be adapted slightly, needs exploring. Local authorities tend to prioritise formal parks over informal spaces (due to a lack of resources) and they may therefore realistically lack the capacity to adequately support Friends Groups in spaces. How they can be supported, and by whom, therefore needs more consideration. This could potentially include other local community groups in the area plus those with expertise in managing natural spaces e.g. wildlife or conservation charities. This fits with civic ecology ideas of a panarchy, where multiple organisations, operating at different levels, support environmental stewardship groups (discussed more later).

Process

The third domain is 'process', highlighting that how a Friends Group operates affects success. This study explored how groups operated, at different stages of their life-cycle, and identified common factors of success. These included, formality, sociability, regular activities, a vision, having active members and supporters plus being able to empower other community members (see Figure 9.1). There is relatively limited previous evidence on how Friends Groups operate, and those studies that have been conducted (e.g. Jones a and b) tend to focus on the local authority perspective, and how they can 'manage' the process, as opposed to that of the groups themselves. Transferable understandings came from the wider literature (Chapter 3), with Mattijssen et al. (2017) identifying factors leading to the long-term sustainability of self-organised community environmental groups. Most studies focus on the active 'middle' period of groups, with few exploring how they began (other than Speller and Ravenscroft, 2005) or how they ended. This study was able to explore both. Beginnings were explored by established groups reflecting back on their early days and, by following developing groups in 'real-time,' learnings from less successful groups could be included and compared. The 'ending' of groups occurred in two cases, increasing understanding as to what factors contributed to this.

For groups to emerge successfully there needs to be support, at an early stage, from relevant authorities. The amount and type of support required varies, depending on the

abilities of members. Some may just need a 'nudge' to get going, whilst others need longer-term, more in-depth support. Ultimately though having a generally supportive, positive attitude towards groups, that Friends can sense, aids success. This fits with Mattijssen et al.'s (2017) findings, that identify the need for enabling authorities and policies, and is discussed more in the next section 'power'. This needs to be matched by having at least a small number of willing local people, with the capabilities and capacity to take on the responsibilities (see earlier people domain). In this study, if either aspect was lacking, groups were unable to successfully form. Exploring how groups ended reinforces these findings. A perceived lack of support from authorities and /or key leaders deciding to end their involvement, triggered groups' demise.

Having some formality was identified as a success factor, fitting with Mattijssen et al.'s (2017) conclusion that groups (albeit not Friends Groups) need roles and structures to be sustainable. This study found that these can be reasonably 'light-touch' e.g. meeting monthly in a social place, but do need to exist in some form. Groups that resisted the need for these, tended to be less successful. The need for regular activities was also identified as a success factor. Activities, however small, give people a sense of purpose, achievement and build momentum, whilst regularity gives people certainty, meaning their involvement becomes habitual. Groups that focused more on talking, and less on action, were less successful. The literature tends to talk about activities as outcomes but this study found that they are also a key part of building the strength and capacity of the group. Once activities dwindle, groups start to lose energy, momentum, and ultimately members.

In-built sociability is key. Ensuring there is the time and space to socialise means people enjoy their experience more, make friends and therefore keep returning. This fits with volunteering theories that emphasise how 'private' benefits, including social aspects, affect continuation rates (Hustinx et al., 2010; Wilson, 2012). Published literature, and local authority participants in this study, regularly mention within-group rivalries or 'fallings out' as an issue in Friends Groups, possibly because it is these groups that capture their attention. However, in this study, no substantive evidence of this emerged. Instead, the main emotion experienced when spending time with group members, was that of camaraderie, friendship, often across demographics, and positivity.

The need for 'adaptive capacity', i.e. being able to adapt to changing circumstances, is identified by Mattijssen et al. (2017) as a key factor for the long-term success of self-organised environmental groups. This comes, the authors say, from having access to social and financial capital and a network of volunteers and supporters. This study concurs that

much of this is transferable to Friends Groups. Groups need active volunteers to sustain their activities, maintain momentum and to ensure the burden does not fall too heavily on one or two people, thus increasing vulnerability. Wider community support lifts morale and gives them 'kudos' when dealing with authorities. Available literature often identifies a lack of volunteers and supporters as an issue, but specific recommendations to address this are rarely given. Groups are advised generally to 'get more people involved' yet, this study found that some leaders struggle with this, lacking skills, confidence and know-how. Reynolds (2008) is the exception, giving practical advice on how to recruit guerrilla gardening 'troops', many of which may well transfer to Friends Groups. A useful area for future action-based research would be to explore and assess different recruitment tactics with groups. This is especially important in deprived areas where residents are more likely to lack the time and confidence required.

Social capital, as per Mattijssen et al. (2017), was found to be of great importance in this study. This was discussed earlier in relation to the role of leaders, whose personal attributes, skills and connections prove vital to success. Another way of providing social capital, that is important for less established groups, is by linking with partners. These can provide them with some of the connections, influence and skills that they otherwise lack – just so long as their visions for the space align. Linking to other Friends Groups was less evident in this study, partly due to time pressures, but could prove part of a broader network, as suggested by civic ecology theory (see later).

Financial capital, identified as a key element by Mattijssen et al., (2017) was found to be of variable importance in this study. Some smaller less ambitious groups only required minor amounts of capital, with access to human resources being more of a limiting factor. Being offered access to funding, especially involving bureaucratic systems, could therefore be irritating, rather than enabling, as it emphasised the lack of understanding authorities had of their needs. For the more ambitious groups with high capabilities, funding allowed them to step-up their activities and make significant improvements to their spaces.

Many implications arise from this domain. Friends Groups, in order to thrive, need to have some roles and structures in place, but focus on ensuring regular frequent activities and building in opportunities for members to socialise and build connections. In line with polycentric ideas, they need to deliberately build up their network of support, by recruiting new people, in whatever guise they are willing to participate, and to link with appropriate partners who may be able to improve their levels of skills and influence. Authorities need to

ensure there is a genuinely supportive environment for groups, that is adapted to their needs. This is discussed more in the next section.

The fourth domain, power, is discussed next, incorporated within the broader theme of the relationships between parks teams and Friends Groups.

The relationship with local authorities

An important set of findings from this study relates to the relationship between local authority park teams and Friends Groups (feeding into Objective 5). Strong contemporary evidence emerged of difficult, often highly fractious, working relationships. This is not a new finding, with Jones for example, discussing it at length in 2002a and b, but the magnitude and prevalence of the issue, along with the impact of it, was greater than anticipated. In the twenty years since these studies, these issues, rather than resolving, appear to have magnified. The impact of these issues is wide-ranging. It causes stress, anxiety and frustration for Friends, negatively affecting wellbeing, whilst park staff are also adversely affected, feeling attacked, over-stretched and always having to be negative. At a neighbourhood level, it leads to inefficiencies, as time and effort are expended on disagreements, as opposed to productive working. Groups are more likely to fold, and new ones less likely to successfully emerge. There are also inequality implications (see later) as these difficult relationships create barriers to involvement, that only resourceful and capable communities can overcome. Importantly, this is not inevitable, the positive case studies in this study (Chapter 8 'building collective responsibility') show that, positive and productive relationships can and do exist.

Reasons for these issues are explored in the literature. These include a lack of resources (time and money) for parks teams to invest in developing relationships, and a lack of training and expertise in working with communities. Their attitude can also be paternalistic, and their way of working hierarchical and formal, rather than collaborative and engaging. This study concurs with these findings, also identifying that parks teams struggle to relinquish meaningful 'control' to communities. This is counter to what is envisaged in models of community collective control (Whitehead et al., 2016), and therefore the benefits from this way of working are not being fully realised. In this study there was a consensus that local authorities should have ultimate control of green spaces, but for a successful collaborative relationship, this needed to be shared with Friends Groups. Perceptions regarding ownership of the green space affect the willingness of park teams to share control (as per

Mathers et al., 2015). Park staff who perceive the community as the owners, as opposed to the local authority, appear more positive about relinquishing some control to Friends Groups.

Ideas of power and participation illuminate this issue (Cornwall, 2008; Laverack, 2019; Popay et al., 2021). Parks teams have power 'over' Friends Groups, as representatives of the local authority, gatekeepers to resources and skills and their professional status. In difficult circumstances, Friends try to combat this by using their influence within the community, their connections and their knowledge of democratic systems. This leads to clashes and conflict, some 'battles' being won by the Friends Groups, others by the parks teams but, ultimately, these further damage relationships, with the effects sometimes lasting many years. Again, the outlier case study shows that, if the right circumstances and approach are taken, a more equal sharing of power is possible and constructive.

Comparing White's typology of participation (Cornwall, 2008) to this study's findings, many of the parks teams see Friends Groups involvement as 'instrumental' i.e., a way of increasing efficiency and resources, whereas Friends tend to view their participation as either 'representative' i.e. a way of influencing, or 'transformative' i.e. being empowered to decide and act for themselves. Differences in why people are participating, and what they expect to gain, can, Cornwall (2008) says, lead to discontent, cynicism and a loss of trust, all of which emerge in this study.

An overriding feeling during data collection was that there was a cultural 'clash' between organisation types, in terms of how they thought and operated. A report by Unwin (2018) on the role of kindness in public policy helped understand this more. This identifies two different 'lexicons' in how organisations and people think and operate: rationale and relational. The rationale lexicon focuses on scrutiny, data, targets and accountability, driven by the need for balance, fairness and transparency, whereas the relational lexicon focuses on connections, individuals and change and is driven by friendship, intuition and storytelling. Currently, in public policy, the former is highly prized and the latter often demeaned. In the current climate of limited resources, the rise of digital communication and the heterogenous nature of society both, Unwin argues, need to operate together. Only by valuing relationships and connections can trust be built between the state and citizens, leading to greater engagement, responsiveness, behaviour change and civic action. This connects closely to asset-based approaches (Foot and Hopkins, 2010).

This idea felt very relevant to this study. The two organisational types were operating in different lexicons and they therefore struggled to understand and engage with each other, leading to distrust, frustration and animosity. Unwin says that, when public services are

faced with the twin pressures of constrained resources and disgruntled populations, staff tend to resist connections and stick to a rigid rule book. This is evident in many different stories in this study, parks teams would adhere to agreed systems, that may have been developed to ensure fairness and transparency, but by doing so, the community become annoyed by their perceived lack of understanding of their own situation and the lack of trust shown, and disengage. When staff are given the time and space to make connections and individual decisions, Unwin says, more positive outcomes emerge. This study strongly concurs with this. The most successful Friends Groups were those where friendships and connections formed between staff and volunteers, and they worked together in a flexible, more informal way outside the constraints of rigid bureaucracies, understanding and considering individual preferences and abilities. Achieving such a change is not however simple. Local authorities face large pressures in terms of resources and public hostility, and organisational culture is often deeply engrained. More relational approaches can also be criticised as 'lax' or enabling favouritism.

Improvement

Identifying ways to improve relationships between Friends Groups and park teams is therefore critical. Whilst the literature and this study agree that this needs to include moving from a position of hierarchical management to one of co-governance or co-production, where control is shared and power is more evenly distributed, there is less evidence for how this can be achieved. Some provisional suggestions, arising from this study and the literature, are discussed below, but this study also recommends conducting more in-depth research exploring the process of change within parks teams, and how that can be effected.

Leadership is undoubtedly important in effecting such a cultural shift (Unwin, 2018; LGA, 2020). Park staff managers (and more senior local authority roles) need to legitimise this way of working by demonstrating to staff that developing positive working relationships with the community is a valued part of their role. In this study, knowing managers let them work flexibly when groups required assistance, and giving them autonomy to develop connections, helped staff change how they worked, leading to more positive relationships. Unwin (2018) suggests utilising performance metrics associated with relational and empowering ways of working (such as meeting Friends Groups, developing plans together or taking on their ideas) to signal the value authorities place on this.

Respecting or appreciating Friend Group contributions needs to become a key value of park teams. Groups, in this study, sensed when this was not present, and this lowered morale.

Krasny and Tidball (2015) suggest 'labelling' and measuring their efforts so authorities value their contribution more, and therefore offer greater support. It could also help raise the status of groups, and subsequently their power.

Workforce development is also important (Jones, 2002b; Walker, 2016; Whitten, 2019). In this study, a lack of training in community engagement amongst park staff was evident. Most learnt via experience and there was much variability between teams, and often a mismatch between their own and Friends Groups perceptions of their competence. A review of park staff skills (APSE, 2019) proposed 19 key competencies, only one including community partnerships, suggesting a lack of importance being given to this aspect of their role. This study concurs with Jones (2002b) who felt that some long-standing staff will be resistant to changes in how they work that training alone will be insufficient to overcome. However, this is not to say all staff will be resistant. In this study, one park manager had shifted from a position of scepticism to great enthusiasm for Friends Groups, engendered by developing a close personal relationship with one group, giving cause for optimism. Learnings from Wigan Council, where public services are shifting towards asset-based approaches, are useful. They found that giving existing staff the time and opportunity to re-learn and recruiting people willing to work in an empowering way helped transform roles (LGA, 2020).

Structural barriers to working in a relational way also need to be understood and, where possible, changed. More flexible working patterns, so staff can attend community meetings could help, as could reducing unnecessary bureaucracy e.g. allocating active Friends Groups a small amount of annual funding to reduce ad hoc requests, or allowing certain actions without authorisation. A major barrier however, evident in this study and the literature, is a lack of available time for parks teams to invest in developing relationships. Parks teams' responsibilities have broadened at the same time as the amount of green space that needs maintaining (per person) has increased. Working with volunteers is time-consuming and demanding and this is often not fully acknowledged. Whilst Friends Groups undoubtedly add value, they can also increase time pressures on already over-stretched park teams, so expecting staff to incorporate community engagement into their already busy work-lives is unrealistic. Exploring what could help address this issue is fundamental therefore and is absorbed into the suggestions below.

Having clarity as to what is expected from each party helps reduce time-sapping misunderstandings and build more trusting relationships (Cornwall, 2018). In this study a lack of clarity as to what groups could or could not do, led to a great deal of wasted effort and contributed to worsening relationships between authorities and Friends. Agreeing what

actions are or are not acceptable for Friends to undertake independently, including health and safety implications, needs to be made clear. Given the individuality of groups and their different capabilities, agreements would need to be tailored to their circumstances. Developing these in partnership with groups would help ensure this was an empowering, rather than a limiting, process.

In this study, park teams rarely worked closely with other local authority departments, such as neighbourhood, community or public health teams. Most said that whilst they should, they did not get the time to develop links. Given the importance of parks in health and community priorities this seems a missed opportunity. Other teams within the local authority are likely to have relevant skills, including community engagement, and connections that would help strengthen Friends Groups and reduce some of the workload for park teams. This would especially help newly emerging groups or those who are struggling with particular issues such as bureaucracy, recruitment or succession planning, and could counter some of the inequality issues discussed later.

This leads to the issue of the strength and capacity of the Friends Groups themselves and how that relates to local authorities. A common refrain in the literature is that, for civic environmental action to thrive, there needs to be increased resilience within the network, and the role of the local authority is to nurture, enable and support the sources of this resilience (Krasny and Tidball, 2015, Aalbers and Sehested, 2018). Currently the relationship between local authorities and Friends Groups tends to be somewhat linear, often involving just two main parties. And resilience tends to come from the groups themselves, as opposed to being facilitated by the local authority.

Enabling Friends Groups to be part of a wider network, with multiple and disparate sources of support, could help build this resilience and reduce their dependency on park teams. This was seen in this study when partners were involved with assisting Friends Groups. The use of forums, to encourage networking and communication between groups is a suggested approach in the literature (Krasny and Tidball, 2015). Forums did exist in two of the areas studied and local authorities felt strongly that they had value, and helped take some of the strain away from parks teams. This did not emerge as strongly from the Friends Groups themselves who tended to operate either independently or alongside partners. However, potentially, forums, alongside other more individual links and connections, could help build resilience. Parks teams would still be a source of expertise, a provider of specialist services and retain overall control, but the pressure on them to be the sole support for Friends Groups would be lessened, shared by others. Such an approach could help expand the

growth of Friends Group practices. It does however require a substantive shift in mindset within park teams.

Inequality

This study was inspired by a desire to explore the impact of Friends Groups on inequality, in terms of the provision and quality of health enhancing green spaces (Objective 4). The findings that emerged raise concerns that, how the system currently operates, favours groups with certain characteristics and qualities, and that these are disproportionately more likely to exist in particular advantaged populations, in more affluent neighbourhoods. A growing reliance on Friends Groups therefore, without appreciating the factors affecting their success or otherwise, and attempting to alter the system to compensate, is potentially exacerbating already existing inequalities of green space provision, and therefore ultimately health. Disadvantaged areas are, in effect, more likely to miss out on the many benefits that Friends Groups can bring to local green spaces. Aspects of the system that are contributing to this are identified within the success factors (see Figure 9.1) principally situated in the people and power domains.

Friends Groups tend to lack diversity. Often consisting of older, white British people they lack representation from, for example, young people, those with families and ethnic minorities (Mathers et al., 2015; Lee, 2018; Nam and Dempsey, 2019; Whitten, 2019). Whilst many of their actions benefit the spaces for everyone, and some show sensitivity in attempting to incorporate other views into their work, there is a danger that the green spaces could become tailored to the needs and views of particular groups. One example is a Friends Group who showed antipathy towards teenagers using the park and therefore adapted the space to discourage this. As Fors et al. (2021) explains, procedural injustice can lead to distributional and interactional injustice i.e. if a biased selection of people is involved, this can affect provision and use. The lack of reliable data regarding the types of people involved adds to these concerns as how significant the issue is, or whether it is changing, cannot be measured. One promising approach identified in this study was Friends Groups helping other groups of local people, with particular interests, to run activities and use the space. This broadened their reach and reduced barriers to inclusion. Linking to other local groups could also help incorporate the views and needs of broader sectors of society.

The importance of 'exceptional' individuals, identified in the people domain, also contributes to inequality. As discussed before, many groups gain necessary power and influence by having leaders who are confident, well-connected, capable, with professional skills and

status. This fits with the 'dominant status' model of volunteering whereby people with higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to volunteer more and have more prestigious roles (Hustinx et al., 2010). The impact of this is that the distribution of successful Friends Groups is uneven or 'patchy', biased towards areas where these types of people live and given their professional status, this is often more affluent places. Existing health inequalities contribute to this, as affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to have healthy people with the necessary available time; in disadvantaged areas most people over 50-55 years old are living with a disability or long-term condition, whilst those in more affluent areas have approximately seventeen more years of healthy life expectancy (Marmot, 2010).

The issue of capabilities is key, and links to the above sections relating to a lack of support for groups and exceptional individuals. Groups in disadvantaged areas are less likely to have access to the capabilities necessary to successfully run a Friends Groups. Parks teams talked about how groups in such areas tended to need high levels of support, or "*handholding*", to deal with bureaucracy or, apply for funding, something that they, given their skill sets and time constraints, were unable to provide. Groups in more affluent areas however can often manage this themselves. This was described by one participant as 'sink or swim', yet this study reveals that the situation is worse than leaving struggling groups to survive or not. Parks teams preferred to work with more capable groups, who they see as being able to achieve a greater impact (in terms of improvements to the space) with less input. Plus, groups in affluent areas are often highly articulate and skilled campaigners, who by advocating for their spaces, draw resources from the over-stretched park teams. These factors therefore compound the situation, more capable groups, that are more likely to be in affluent areas, are receiving additional support, whilst less capable groups receive less help.

Viewing these results regarding inequality, through a health promotion lens, is very concerning. A core value of health promotion is to attempt to address social injustice by recognising the gradients that exist in health and prioritising those with the greatest need. In this situation, this would mean focusing resources on disadvantaged areas, where quality green space is most needed, yet lacking. Perhaps though, the fact this does not happen is not entirely surprising, as the focus of parks teams has traditionally been just that, providing the best quality green space possible, and, in that regard, working with the most capable individuals makes some sense. This lack of attention to inequality was found both in the literature on Friends Groups and during this study. Most parks team participants showed very little awareness of health inequalities and appeared not to see it as something they should be addressing. There was also a lack of awareness as to how living in a deprived area may impact on people's abilities to take civic action. Signs of stigmatising residents in

poorer areas emerged, with some participants suggesting they were 'demanding' or responsible for the poor state of the parks in their areas. This is not a criticism of individuals, these types of attitudes are prevalent across society and, if people are not aware of how inequality can impact individuals and communities, they cannot be held wholly responsible. In addition, parks teams have traditionally been very separate from public health in local authorities, and this is only just beginning to change. However, as providers of public services, where addressing inequality is paramount, this lack of awareness and tendency to stigmatise urgently needs addressing.

Relating this discussion back to the earlier model (Figure 9.1) it becomes clear that in order to ensure inequality is not perpetuated, the emphasis on the different domains needs shifting. Whilst the people involved will always be important, the successful operation of Friends Group needs to become less reliant on exceptional, professional individuals and more about providing a supportive environment so more representative people, that exist in every community, are encouraged and feel able to get involved. This means re-addressing the power dynamics so local authorities share control in a more open and positive way with communities. In addition, how place plays a role needs recognising as deprivation affects both the physical spaces (in terms of antisocial behaviour) and the capacities of individuals to become involved.

A fundamental criticism (Popay et al., 2021) of contemporary community empowerment initiatives is that they hand responsibility over to communities without understanding or addressing structural inequalities or differences in power. As communities lack the necessary capabilities or resources, they may then fail, leading to a sense of powerlessness (for themselves) and stigmatisation (from others). Findings from this study at least partially concur with this. Parks teams did show a lack of awareness of structural inequalities and some Friends Groups clearly did feel powerless, unable to influence or change the situation in their area. They also had an awareness that others viewed them negatively. Their experience of community empowerment therefore was, at times, negative and not always empowering.

A critical implication arising from this is that, if too much reliance is placed on Friends Groups to maintain green spaces, communities that lack particular capabilities, will 'miss out' on their health-promoting benefits. This is why there should not be a total reliance on this model to maintain these vital spaces. 'Rights' to local, accessible and quality green space need to exist, alongside active engagement with communities. This could help ensure health inequalities start to be tackled, rather than exacerbated.

Despite all the difficulties and challenges experienced by groups, many were able to succeed and achieve transformational results. This study therefore highlights the many assets that these neighbourhoods do possess. They are not helpless recipients of assistance, but they do need to operate in a supportive and enabling environment, where their skills, enthusiasm and passion for the space are appreciated and respected. If that occurs, the benefits that Friends Groups bring, to the whole community and individual members, could be far more prevalent.

Chapter 10: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to identify how Friends Groups can work with local authorities to ensure their local urban green spaces are well-maintained and utilised. This is important because having good quality green space near where people live, improves health and wellbeing. The study focused on deprived areas, as people living in poorer neighbourhoods tend to have worse health and less access to good quality green space. Improving green spaces in these areas could therefore help reduce health inequalities.

Friends Groups are a growing UK phenomena, with approximately 6000 in existence. They consist of local people acting together to improve and protect their local parks and green spaces. Underlying the study's aims and objectives was an overarching question as to how Friends Groups develop and what sustains them, specifically in areas experiencing disadvantage and inequality. Seven 'case studies' participated; five established Friends Groups and two developing ones. Data collection was influenced by ethnographic principles and took place over three years to gain in-depth insight into how groups worked, and what affected their success. Interviews with local authority park staff also took place.

There is a lack of academic attention regarding the scale and diversity of Friends Groups' activities and what influences these. One contribution of this study is in identifying how substantial the impact of Friends Groups can be on green spaces. Their involvement can transform neglected, under-utilised green spaces into thriving community places, much used and appreciated by local people. The groups tackled antisocial behaviour, improved facilities, raised funds, promoted the spaces, campaigned to protect them and ensured they were prioritised by authorities. Their involvement was often long-term, over decades. This study emphasises the individuality of groups and that their focus, activities and level of ambition are driven by the interests, passions and skills of the Friends, and the particulars of the space they looked after.

One substantive gap in the evidence base is a lack of in-depth insight regarding how Friends Group develop and are sustained over time, especially from the perspective of those leading and participating in those groups. A key contribution to knowledge from this study is therefore the development of a conceptual framework that identifies four domains affecting the success, or otherwise, of Friends Groups: Place, People, Process and Power. These four domains interact with each other, affecting whether they flourish, or are constrained. This framework is potentially transferable, as a way of understanding and building success.

This study found that the role of group leaders is critical, influencing success (the people domain). This is in contrast to existing evidence that pays limited attention to this aspect of

groups. Their commitment, energy and perseverance, often over many years, was remarkable. The most successful groups were led by confident, capable and articulate people. Many had professional backgrounds, which, along with other qualities, brought status, connections and authority to the role, helping them influence authorities and motivate other residents. A strong emotional connection to the space, along with a desire to improve it for others, motivated people to get involved.

The type of place was also found to affect success. Groups tended to be more successful in traditional, formal parks, whereas in informal, wilder spaces, getting established was more difficult. The 'wildness' of the space affected people's engagement, as did a lack of emotional connection and higher rates of antisocial behaviour. A desire for order and control, to 'tame' the space emerged. The process domain highlights that having formal structures, regular activities and in-built sociability helped groups succeed, as did having a network of active members and supporters. Partners were a useful support for newer less confident groups, whilst empowering other members of the local community to act, helped established groups reach a broader range of people.

The study findings offer new understandings regarding the relationship between local authorities and Friends Groups. Whilst evidence already existed that this relationship could be challenging, this study provided more contemporary knowledge, from the perspective of both Friends and local authorities. It revealed the scale of these conflicts and disagreements, and how they arose plus, the impact of this on Friends, who experienced stress, frustration and disillusionment. Concepts of power, control and participation helped understand these issues. Parks teams tended to see the participation of Friends Groups as a way of providing additional resources and increasing efficiency, and were reluctant to cede control or share power with them. Friends, in contrast, tended to see their participation as a way of being involved in decisions and having an influence. This 'mis-match' in expectation and understanding emerged as a source of tension. This study also contributes to knowledge by identifying how it is possible to establish a positive and productive working partnership. Investing time in building the relationship is critical as is having, and demonstrating, mutual respect, trust and appreciation.

Friends Groups are part of a wider shift in public policy, from local authorities delivering services themselves, towards working with communities to share responsibilities. Some people see this as empowering for communities, whilst others see it as an abdication of government responsibilities. A substantial evidence gap exists in regard to inequality; whether relying on Friends Groups to maintain / improve green spaces reduces inequality in

green space provision or increases it. This has not been explored in-depth before. This study, located in disadvantaged areas, identified that how the model currently operates, is potentially exacerbating inequalities in green space provision (and therefore health). Deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to have high-status, connected individuals, with the time and capacity to run a Friends Groups (identified as a key success factor). And parks teams, who lack awareness of inequality, display a preference for working with more capable groups who, again, are less likely to exist in deprived areas. Disadvantaged areas also experience greater challenges relating to place e.g. anti-social behaviour.

This novel finding, seen through a health promotion lens, that views social justice and reducing inequality as fundamental values, is concerning and needs to be addressed. This requires being aware of this issue and the impact working practices have on it and adjusting accordingly. Developing the capacity and resilience of groups in disadvantaged areas is critical, as is establishing more supportive, encouraging environments for all Friends Groups. A series of recommendations now follows, concluding this thesis.

Recommendations

Selected recommendations, based on the evidence from this study, are now presented. Those included are felt to be especially important and also specific enough to act on. A full list, detailing which organisations each applies to, is in Appendix 10.1.

This study has found that there needs to be better, more reliable, knowledge of the Friends Group phenomena, in order to appreciate its value and understand potential environmental justice issues. See Appendix 10.1, Set A. To achieve this, systems need to be established that capture consistent data on the prevalence and distribution of Friends Groups and the demographics of those involved. Information on the type and scale of activities they do, needs capturing, in a way that is not too onerous for groups. Finally, the impact of being a Friend needs examining more thoroughly, including potential negative aspects.

The strength and resilience of Friends Groups needs building. This involves actions groups can take themselves, as well as appropriate support and encouragement from authorities. See Appendix 10.1, Set B. Friends Groups should focus on engaging more people by ensuring regular activities with sociability built in. They need to keep trying to encourage new people in, recruiting those who are emotionally connected to the space. Activities should be directed towards whatever interests and motivates those involved, not just what 'needs to be done'. Local authorities need to support the groups in all these endeavours, allowing them to

be independent, individual and to make their own choices (where practicable). They need to ensure easy access to funding and help connect groups into a network of support (locally, regionally and nationally). Listening to groups and responding to their needs / feedback is key. Finally, both groups and local authorities need to ensure attention is paid to the issue of succession.

A key focus needs to be on improving relationships between local authority parks teams and Friends Groups. This needs to include a change in mindset towards greater sharing of control. See Appendix 10.1, Set C. Local authority leaders need to demonstrate that more relational styles of working are encouraged. Staff need to be given greater flexibility to build personal connections with Friends and this needs to be acknowledged in performance metrics and work planning. Where possible, systems should be re-designed to reduce any unnecessary barriers to this way of working. Working more closely with other directorates, in order to learn from them and share the work involved, is key. There needs to be clarity regarding remit and expectations, tailored to groups' capabilities and interests.

Given the concerns raised in this study regarding inequality, authorities need to ensure that relying on Friends Groups does not inadvertently increase differences in green space quality and provision. See Appendix 10.1, set D. Parks teams need to be aware of inequality and how this impacts on communities' abilities to undertake civic action. Additional, appropriate, tailored support needs to be available for potential Friends Groups in disadvantaged areas, delivered by parks teams working in partnership with other related directorates and organisations (including community and voluntary groups). Established Friends Groups could also be encouraged to assist other newer groups. The lack of diversity within Friends Groups requires attention. This study recommends further research into understanding how ethnicity affects participation and what actions can be taken to improve this.

A final set of recommendations (Appendix 10.1, Set E) relates to how to improve spaces to increase community engagement. Groups, especially those in deprived areas, need assistance in tackling anti-social behaviour. How green spaces, especially informal ones, can be designed and maintained so the needs of nature are met, alongside the need for humans to feel safe, requires further exploration, as does how to alter attitudes towards more natural, wild spaces so people, especially those living in deprived areas feel more comfortable there.

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Appendices

Appendix 3.1: Papers relating to Public Participation in UGS

Brief Title	Authors / Date	Journal	Location	Methodology / participants	Relevant topics explored
Reviews					
User Participation in UGS – for the people or the parks?	Fors et al., 2015	Urban forestry and urban greening	USA, Europe, UK and other	Systematic review 31 included studies	Benefits of user participation, for who. Assesses level of evidence.
Striving for Inclusion – systematic review of long-term participation in mmt of UGS	Fors et al., 2021	Frontiers in Sustainable Cities	Mainly Europe (38), USA (8) plus others	Systematic review 47 included studies	Participation approaches, reasons for initiating, inclusion of / barriers for marginalised groups
Case study					
Long-term prospects of citizens managing UGS	Mattijssen et al., 2017	Urban forestry and urban greening	Mainland Europe	Three case-studies - groups managing GS for more than ten years. Documentary evidence, interviews.	Factors that influence long-term involvement in managing UGS. Barriers / challenges.
Critical upscaling – how citizens' initiatives contribute to transition in governance	Aalbers and Sehested, 2018	Urban forestry and urban greening	The Netherlands	One case study - qualitative	Impact of citizens' initiative on municipality practices
Mixed Method					
Personal and environmental drivers of resident participation in urban public woodland management	Fors et al., 2019	Landscape and Urban Planning	Denmark	Longitudinal (7 years) mixed method. Quantitative - measures of resident input, woodland survey, resident demographics. Plus qualitative interviews.	How personal, environmental and social factors interact to increase resident participation in woodland management
Qualitative					
Between Big Ideas and Daily Realities	Molin et al., 2014	Urban Forestry & Urban Greening	Denmark	Qualitative interviews with GS managers (x10)	Explores governance of GS and changes to it from involving public
Re-defining the	Jerome et al.,	Environmental Research	NW England	Desk-based examination of	Develops typology of CSGI projects

characteristics of environmental volunteering	2017			CSGI projects in Mersey Forest, NW England (142 in total).	
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Appendix 5.1: Research explainer



People and Parks Research



This study is exploring how community groups and local authorities work together to improve Urban Green Spaces, in deprived areas, for health.

It is being conducted as a PhD by Jenny Woodward, a Research Fellow in the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University. Jane South, Professor of Healthy Communities and Pinki Sahota, Professor of Childhood Obesity are supervising.

BACKGROUND

Parks are an integral part of people's lives, with over half the UK population visiting monthly. People feel passionately about their parks, visiting them for walks, to see nature, to run, reflect or play. They provide a host of benefits - adding character to an area, acting as a place for communities to gather and improving bio-diversity.

Strong evidence exists that good quality Urban Green Space improves health and wellbeing. Exposure to green space is associated with lower mortality, lower rates of diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, better mental health and better pregnancy outcomes. Its presence can improve community spirit and social capital. Importantly for public health, deprived areas tend to have less good quality green space than richer areas, thus exacerbating existing health inequalities.

Friends of Parks groups are playing an increasingly important role in maintaining and improving green spaces. It is estimated that there are 5900 such groups in the UK, an increase of nearly a third in the last three years.

RESEARCH AIMS

This research aims to find out how local community groups work with Local Authorities to maintain, improve and use Urban Green Spaces. Its focus is on deprived areas where health inequalities and the need for quality green space is highest. The study will find out:

- What community groups do to improve and maintain their local green space
- How the groups got started and how they sustain their activity
- How this affects the health and wellbeing of the community
- How community groups work with Local Authorities

THE RESEARCH

I will spend time with a range of community groups to develop an understanding of what they do and how they work. This will involve conducting interviews with group leads, focus groups with participants and participating in events or activities. Later on, I will interview people who work for Local Authorities, whose remit includes Parks and / or public health.

I hope the research will lead to a greater understanding of how community groups looking after their local green spaces can best be supported for long-term sustainability.

Which groups will be included?

‘Established’ groups. Initially four groups who have been active for at least two years and have been able to improve their local green space will be involved. This is to identify important success factors.

‘Developing’ groups. Later on groups that are still in their early stages of development will be asked to be involved. I will spend more time with these groups so their development can be observed in ‘real-time’.

To take part groups need to:

- Be in an urban area that experiences deprivation
- Have at least three members or people that regularly participate
- Preferably been started by local people organising themselves ‘bottom up’
- If possible, cover a range of ethnicities and both genders

Groups do NOT need to be formally constituted or receive funding to take part.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

Jenny Woodward will lead the research. She is an experienced researcher who specialises in working in community settings with groups, volunteers and service users.

The Centre for Health Promotion Research is at the fore-front of research into Healthy Communities, particularly in relation to volunteering, lay health workers and active citizenship for improved health and wellbeing.

Examples of recent / current work:

- **The national** evaluation of the Department of Health's Social Care and Volunteering Fund (HSCVF).
- Working with the New Economics Foundation to evaluate the People's Health Trust's Local People Fund.

[Contact information of the researcher, supervisor and ethics contact redacted June 2024]

Appendix 5.2: Gatekeeper letter

Dear [lead person],

IF PHONE OR EMAIL CONTACT ALREADY

Thank you for agreeing to think about [*named community group*] taking part in the 'People and Parks' research.

IF NO CONTACT

I am conducting a PhD study called 'People and Parks' – it is exploring how community groups and local authorities work together to improve Urban Green Spaces for health. I'd like to invite [*named community group*] to be one of the groups taking part in this research. You were recommended by [name of organisation] as a group that has been established for some time and has had a positive impact already.

ALL

It is recognised that community groups do an important job in maintaining and improving parks, woodlands and other green spaces. In this study I want to learn more about how these groups work – what they do, how they get started, what helps keep them going, their relationship with the Local Authority and what barriers they face. I also want to find out how they could be improving the health and wellbeing of local people.

I hope that this research will lead to a greater understanding of how community groups who look after their local green space can best be supported.

What would taking part involve?

If your group agreed to take part, I'd like to:

- Interview a lead person or persons – someone who helped set up the group or has been involved from the beginning
- Take part in an activity with the group in your park or urban green space – I would discuss with you what a suitable activity could be
- Conduct a focus group with people who help or volunteer with the community group

I would need your help identifying people who may want to be part of the research. Before I did any research I would check you are happy with everything.

Who else will be taking part?

I plan to work with a number of different community groups. At this stage I are involving groups who have been active for at least a couple of years and have had success in terms of improving / maintaining their local green space.

To take part groups need to:

- Be in an urban area that experiences deprivation
 - Have at least three members or people that regularly participate
 - Preferably been started by local people organising themselves
- Groups do NOT need to be formally constituted or receive funding.

Please find enclosed an information sheet for any potential interview or focus group participants.

The research has been assessed and approved by a Leeds Beckett University ethics coordinator. I am an experienced researcher who works regularly with community and voluntary organisations.

If you are interested in taking part, please contact me to have a chat. I am happy to talk on the phone or come and visit you in person.

Yours sincerely

Appendix 5.3: Gatekeeper checklist

‘People and Parks’

Gatekeeper Role Checklist

Thank you for agreeing to help support me with this study. This is a checklist to help make sure the research is done ethically.

General:

- Please check with key members of the group if they are happy for [named community group] to be part of this study. If they are not, I will withdraw.

For the activity day, please:

- Let volunteers know that I will be attending on that day as part of a research study. I will send you some text to put in an email and a copy of a flyer for the day.
- Let me know if there is anyone that I should not approach to have a conversation with. This could be someone who is vulnerable or has said they do not want to take part.

For the focus group, please:

- Distribute the information sheet to people you think may want to take part.
- Let people know that taking part is voluntary. Do not try to persuade them to take part if they are not willing.
- Only provide me with contact details if that person has agreed that they are okay with that.

Photographs, please:

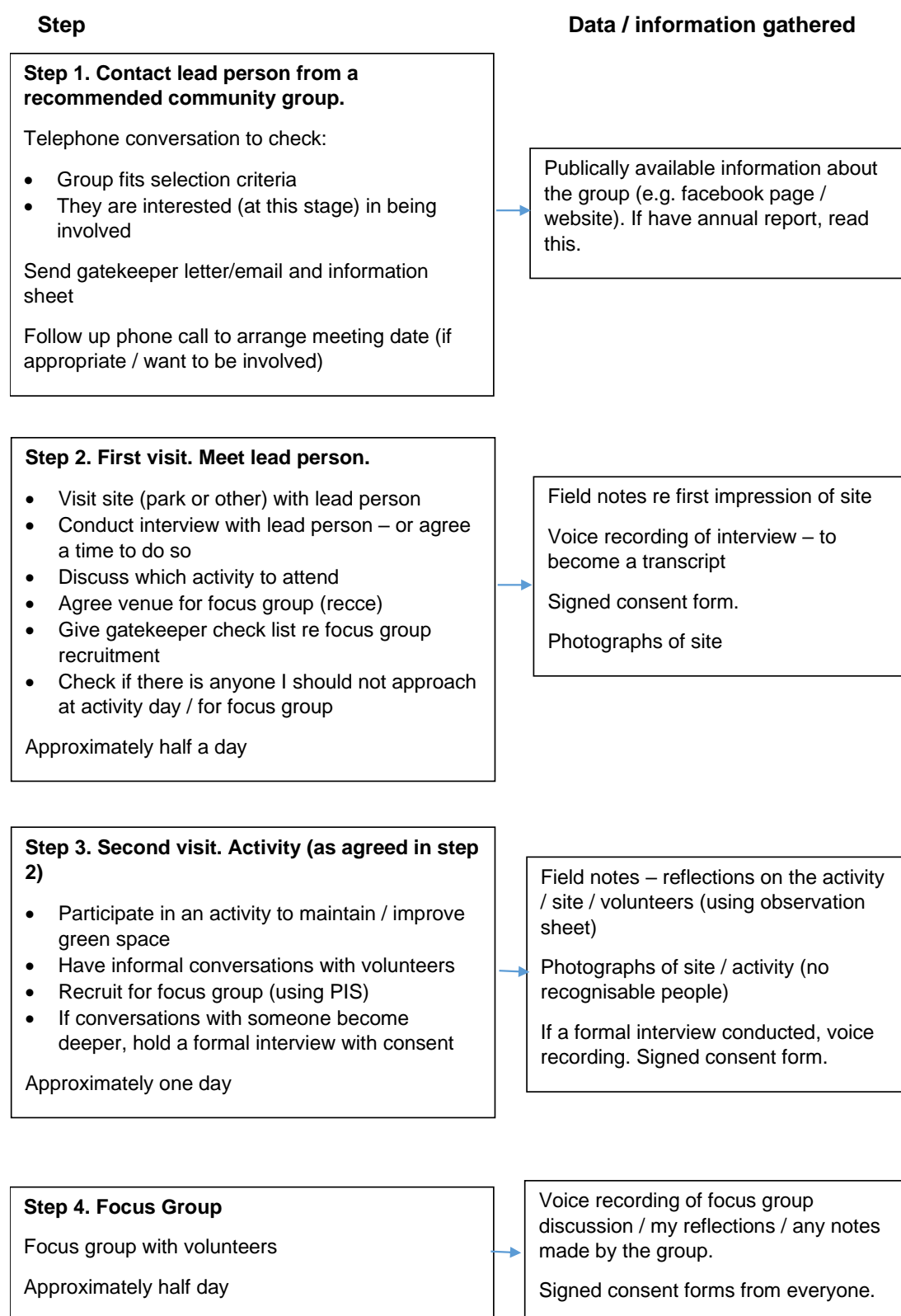
- Make sure any photos you send me do not identify an individual or contain an image of something that would identify the green space to someone from outside the area (e.g. a sign with the name on or a particularly distinctive feature).

More information:

- If someone asks you for more information about the research, please make sure they have read the interview / focus group information sheet or observation flyer.
- If you, or anyone else is unsure about any aspect of the research or would just like to discuss it further, please contact me – see details below.

[Contact information redacted, June 2024]

Appendix 5.4: Data collection flow-chart (established groups)



Appendix 5.5: Interview schedule for group members (established groups)

‘People and Parks’ An exploration of how Communities and Local Authorities can work together to improve Urban Green Spaces for health

Within this schedule are a full range of potential questions – which ones are used will be tailored to the community group member’s role, their history with the group and the location of the interview (e.g. if full or brief).

Introduction

- Introduce myself (if not done already) – who I am, where I’m from. Thank them for speaking to me.
- Explain the aims of the study and what their role is, ensuring they have received and had the chance to read a copy of the information sheet.

Key ethical points

- Ensure they understand key points, i.e:
 - Voluntary participation – taking part is voluntary, they don’t have to agree to an interview and can withdraw, up until Autumn of this year, without giving a reason.
 - Confidentiality – what they say to me I will keep confidential. The only exception is if they say something that makes me worry for their safety or the safety of others – if that is the case, I’ll have to pass it onto the relevant authorities or discuss with my supervisor.
 - If you consent to this, the interviews will be recorded and then typed up. These will be saved on a university computer that is password protected or in a locked filing cabinet. Only myself and my two supervisors will have access to them.
 - I intend to use what I’ve found out - from this interview with you and with other people - to write up a Phd thesis and other academic publications (e.g. scientific papers or books). However, this will be anonymous –I will never use your name or any other identifying characteristics in anything I write or say publically.

Check

- Do you have any questions? (*answer any that arise*)
- Are you happy to proceed?
If yes - ask them to sign a consent form, then proceed with interview
If no – thank them for their time and allow them to carry on with their day

Neighbourhood and group structure

1. Could you tell me a little bit about this neighbourhood?
 - What is the 'community spirit' like locally?
2. How did (*named group*) get started?
 - When, why, what helped make it happen?
3. How is the group structured?
 - Posts? Constituted? Meetings? Level of formality?

Role / motivations

4. What is / are your role(s)?
 - Current / previous
5. Thinking back, why did you decide to get involved?
 - Why do you carry on being involved?
6. Are you someone / the type of people who tend(s) to get involved in the community?
 - Why do you think that's important?

Group Activities

7. Can you tell me what the group's main activities are?
Probe: maintenance / improvements / fundraising / events / advocacy
8. How does the group decide what to do?
9. What keeps the group going?
10. What roles have people taken on within the group?
Probe: which roles are particularly important / critical to success / any 'gaps'?

Volunteers

11. How do people tend to get involved in the group?
- Where do most volunteers come from?
 - Do they reflect the type of people who live there generally?
12. Do you welcome new volunteers?
- If so, how do you attempt to recruit them?
 - Are there any groups you've struggled to reach?

Connections – to other groups / organisations

13. Does the group have connections to other organisations in this neighbourhood?
- How links made / how has this helped or hindered?
14. Does the group have connections to organisations outside of the neighbourhood?
- Probes – as above

Relationship with LA

15. How would you describe the group's relationship with the Local Authority?
- Do they welcome (*named group's*) involvement?
 - Have they helped or hindered the group at all?

Assets and skills

16. What key assets or skills do members have?
- Does the group lack any particular skills or assets?
17. Have any members helped connect the group to useful organisations or information?
18. Has the group faced any particular barriers or problems?

Impact

19. Has being part of this group changed you in anyway?
- Has it had any negative effects?
 - Has it made you more active in the community?

20. Do you think this group has had an effect on other people living in the neighbourhood?

Inequalities

21. Thinking more broadly, do you think having voluntary groups involved in looking after green spaces is a positive thing?

- Are there any potential downsides?
- Do you think it could lead to some areas having better green spaces than others?

Summing Up

22. What are the most important factors that have made this group a success?

23. What advice would you give to any new groups starting out?

Appendix 5.6: Focus group schedule (established groups)

‘People and Parks’ An exploration of how Communities and Local Authorities can work together to improve Urban Green Spaces for health

Introduction

- Introduce myself (if not done already) – who I am, where I’m from. Thank them for coming.
- Explain the aims of the study and what their role is, ensuring they have received and had the chance to read a copy of the information sheet.

Key ethical points

- Ensure they understand key points, i.e:
 - Taking part is voluntary, they don't have to agree to taking part and they can withdraw, up until Autumn of this year, without giving a reason.
 - Confidentiality – what they say to me I will not repeat outside of this room. The only exception is if they say something that makes me worry for their safety or the safety of others – if that is the case, I'll have to pass it onto the relevant authorities or discuss with my supervisor.
 - If you consent to this, the focus group will be recorded and then typed up. These will be saved on a university computer that is password protected or in a locked filing cabinet. Only myself and my two supervisors will have access to them.
 - I intend to use what I've found out - from this focus group and interviews with other people - to write up a Phd thesis and other academic publications (e.g. scientific papers or books). However, this will be anonymous –I will never use your name or any other identifying characteristics in anything I write or say publically.

Focus group rules (additional to the above)

- What is said here today is confidential, so please don't repeat anything that is sensitive, particularly personal or potentially could upset someone.
- Everyone should have opportunity to speak and be listened to – please try to listen to what other people are saying.

Check

Do you have any questions? (*answer any that arise*)

Are you happy to proceed?

If yes - ask them to sign a consent form, then proceed with focus group

If no – thank them for their time and allow them to carry on with their day

Registration Form **(to be formatted)** –all to complete

Your name (first name only):

Your gender:

Your age (approximately!):

Your current status e.g. working / student / retired / home-maker

Your current or previous occupation:

Approximately how far do you live from **[named UGS]**?

What is your role in **[named group]**? (*Include any previous roles you've had too*)

Are you involved in any other community or voluntary groups? If so, please list which groups and what your role is.

Opening question

1. Could you tell us your name and how long you've lived in this area?

Introductory question

2. What are some of the good things about living in this neighbourhood?

Key question

3. What is the community spirit like locally?

Potential follow up questions:

- Do people tend to take part in community groups or activities?
- Do people tend to get along?

Transition question

4. Can you tell me what got you involved with this group?

Key question

5. Can you tell me how the group formed?

Potential follow up questions:

- What did it form for?
- What helped it happen?

6. What keeps the group going now?

Potential follow up questions:

- Who helps keep it going?
- What else keeps it going?
- Any issues / barriers?

7. How do people tend to get involved in the group?

Potential follow up questions:

- Where do most volunteers come from?
- Do they reflect the type of people who live here generally?
- Do you welcome new volunteers?
- Are there any people that aren't involved, that you'd like to be?

8. How would you describe the group's relationship with the Local Authority?

- Do they welcome (*named group's*) involvement?
- Have they helped or hindered the group at all?

9. Has being part of the group changed you in anyway?

Potential follow up questions:

- In terms of your health / wellbeing / social connections / confidence / connections locally
- Anything negative?

10. What effect do you think it's had on the neighbourhood in general?

11. Thinking more widely, what do you think the benefits and the downsides are of having voluntary groups involved in looking after green spaces?

Ending Questions

12. If you had to identify one or two things that make this group work, what are they?
13. What advice would you give to a new group that is just starting out?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Appendix 5.7: Participant observation checklist (community activity)

To be completed after the event – same day if possible.

Activity	
Name of activity Time / date / day Weather	
Location (which UGS /where is it) Describe the UGS – assets / issues	
Activity What were the group doing? (description) How did they decide what to do?	
Volunteers Who was involved? (Number, gender, approx. age) What skills / abilities did they have?	
Group interaction How did the group work together? How did they communicate? How did they make decisions?	
Members of the Public Interactions with people outside the group	

Other organisations Were there any interactions with other groups / organisations e.g. Local Authority?	
Success Factors Any noticeable success factors observed?	
Issues / limitations? Were any barriers to activities noted?	
Benefits Any observations / comments re benefits to group members, local people / local environment	
The future Any comments / observations re the future of the UGS or the group	
Other	

Appendix 5.8: Development of interview schedules (Woodward, 2018)

Topic	Question	who to	concept
<p>Int with lead person(s)</p> <p>- Focus groups with regular participants</p> <p>- structure + history of VCO</p>	<p>- length of time - hierarchy</p> <p>- formality - meet</p> <p>- funding - size</p> <p>- communication methods</p>	lead	
- activities	what group does / how often (maintenance / improvement / social) with advocates	all lead	voluntary theory - rational?
- connections	what other groups do they do they like to (links to LA)	lead	social capital
- mobilisation	who / how did it start (being vol / org)	lead	vol theory
- sustainability	(change)	all	
- assets (people)	backgrounds skills / assets / capacity new person	all	vol

Appendix 5.9: Interview schedule for developing groups

People and Parks Research

There will be conversations / interviews across a period of two years. Questions are therefore split into; initial, follow ups and final schedules.

Ethics

- At the initial interaction go through the information sheet and the consent form to check they understand what participating involves. Ask if they have any questions – answer accordingly. If they are happy, ask them to tick and sign the consent form.
- At subsequent interactions ensure they are happy for you to be there (at an event) or to participate in an interview. Check they still remember the main points of the information sheet – hand out a new one if needed. Ask if they have any questions – answer accordingly. If they are happy, ask them to re-sign the consent form.

Initial interaction

Background – neighbourhood and personal

1. Could you tell me a little bit about this **neighbourhood**?
 - What is the 'community spirit' like locally?
 - Do people tend to get involved in community activities?
2. **How long** have you and your family lived here?
3. Do you have many **connections** in the community?
 - With other people who live here? Or other organisations?
 - Do you tend to get **involved** in community groups or activities? Why is that?

Aims and Group structure

4. Can you tell me how the group got started?
 - When was that?
 - What helped make it happen?
5. Can you describe to me how the group is organised?
 - Is it constituted?

6. What do you want the group to **achieve**? Or, what are the aims of the group?

Roles / Skills

7. What is **your role** in the group?

8. Can you tell me **who** else is **involved**?

- What roles do other members have?

9. What are people in the group **good at**? Or, What **skills** and **abilities** do you think the group has?

- What are people in the group less good at? Or, what skills and abilities are missing>

Activities

10. What sort of **activities** have you done so far?

- What has **gone well**?

11. Have there been any **challenges or issues**?

- Have you managed to overcome these /if so how?

Support / Connections

12. Are any organisations or other groups **helping** you?

- In what way?
- Do you need any more help?

13. Have you had any contact with the **Local Authority**?

- Have they helped or hindered the group at all?

Impact

14. What **difference** do you **think** the group will make to the **neighbourhood**? *NB May be too speculative – ask if it feels right.*

15. What difference to you **think** it might make to you and your family? *NB May be too speculative – ask if it feels right.*

Concerns

16. Is there anything you are worried about in terms of the group and its work?

Future

17. What do you hope to do next?

Close

18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Follow Ups

Activities

1. What sort of **things** have you been doing since we last met? (*give prompts from schedule last time*).
Probe: maintenance / improvements / fundraising / events / advocacy
2. What has been **going well**?
3. Have there been any **challenges** or issues?
 - How have you tried to overcome these?
4. How does the group **decide** what to do?

Aims and Group structure

5. Have there been any **changes** to how the group is organised since we last met?
Probe: meetings / structure / policies
6. How well has the group been **working together**?
7. What has helped **keep you all going**?

Roles / Skills

8. Have you had any **new people** joining?
 - How did that happen?
 - What role have they taken on?
9. Have you had any people leaving?
 - Do you know why that was?

10. Has the group gained any **skills and abilities** over the last *(period of time)*?
- Last time you said you were lacking people who could *(draw from last interview)*. Has that changed at all?

Support / Connections

11. Are you still getting **help or support** from *x organisation(s)*.
12. Have you made any **new connections** to other organisations?
- How did this happen? How has it helped / hinder?
13. Have you had any contact with the **Local Authority**?
- Have they helped or hindered the group at all?

Impact

14. Has being part of this group changed you in anyway?
Probe: health / wellbeing, connections, confidence
- Has it made you more active in the community?
 - Has it had any negative effects?
15. Do you think the group has made a difference to the neighbourhood?
Probe: Physical changes, connections between people, community spirit.

Concerns

16. Is there anything you are worried about in terms of the group and its work?

Future

17. What do you hope to do next?

Close

18. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Thank you.

Final Interview

Activities

1. Over the last couple of years you've done lots of different **activities** locally (*list them based on previous interviews / observations*).
 - What are you most proud of? Why do you think that worked well?
 - Where did you **struggle**? Probe: why was that?
2. Is there anything you'd have liked to do, but didn't manage? Probe: barriers.

Aims and Group structure

3. (*Two years*) ago you said the **aims** of the group were (*draw from initial interview*).
 - Is this still the same now, or have the aims changed at all?
 - How far do you think you've come towards meeting them?
4. Thinking about the group and how it is **organised**, what has worked well?
Probe: level of formality / organisation
 - What do you think could be **improved**?
5. What has **helped keep** the group going?

Roles / Skills

6. Has **your role** changed over the last couple of years? If so, how?
 - Why have you stayed involved?
7. Who are the **key people** in the group now?
 - Has this changed at all over the past couple of years? If so, how / why.
8. Do you think you've had the **right people** involved?
9. Has the group had the right **skills and abilities** to be a success? Or, what are the people in the group good at?
 - Has it lacked anything in particular? Or are there any skills or abilities the group doesn't have?

Support / Connections

10. What **organisations or people** have been particularly helpful over the last couple of years?
Probe: how they helped – practically, emotionally.

- How did they get involved?

11. How would you describe your relationship with the **Local Authority**?

- How do you think they perceive your group? Has this changed over time?

12. Have you lacked any support or help?

- Is there anyone you'd have liked to work with but didn't get the chance?

Impact

13. What **difference** has being part of this group made to **you**?

Probe: health / wellbeing, connections, confidence

- Has it made you more active in the community?
- How has it affected your relationship with the area?
- Has it had any negative effects?

14. Do you think the group has made a **difference to the neighbourhood**? If so, how?

Probe: Health and wellbeing, physical changes, connections, community spirit.

Success Factors

15. What two or three things have helped make the group work?

16. What **advice** would you give to any new groups starting out?

Concerns

17. What have been your biggest **challenges** over the last couple of years?

Future

18. What are your **hopes for the future** of the group?

- How optimistic do you feel?
- What would help keep the group going?

Inequalities

19. Thinking more broadly now, do you think that having voluntary groups looking after green spaces is a positive thing?

- Are there any potential downsides?

- Do you think it could lead to some areas having better green spaces than others?

Close

20. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix 5.10: Partner organisations interview schedule

People and Parks Research

Current Role and Previous Experience

1. Could you tell me about your **current role** with (*partner organisation*)?
 - How long have you been doing this role?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your **professional background**? (*how they came to this role*)
Probe:
 - Area of qualifications / type of background e.g. conservation
3. Have you **worked previously** with 'Friends of' groups or in community engagement?
If so, can you tell me a bit about that?
 - What approaches did you use? Did you receive any training?
 - Did you have any particularly positive or negative experiences?
If not, have you had any training in this area?

Specific Project

4. Can you tell me about the **current project**?
 - What are the aims of the project?
 - What is the role of your organisation?
 - Who are you working with? (internal and external)

Working with the Friends Group

5. **What was the motivation for** working with the group?
6. **How** do you work with (*named Friends group*)?
 - Who are your main contacts?
 - How often do you meet?
 - What sort of **activities** do you do with them?
7. How do you **decide** what to do when working with them?

Benefits and Challenges

8. What are the **benefits** of working with the group?
Probe: For YWT / the project / for the Friends
9. What are the **challenges** of working with them?
- If some stated: How have you tried to overcome this?

Support and Training

10. What **support or training** do you think the group needs?
- **Who** do you think should be providing this?
 - What support is (*partner organisation*) able to offer them?
 - Is there anything you'd like to be able to offer but can't?
11. What **role** do you think (*partner organisation*) has in terms of the group's development?
12. Do you have sufficient support or training in how to work with Friends groups?
- Could it be improved in any way?

Impact

13. Has working with this group **changed** your approach in anyway?
14. Do you think the work you are doing with the group has impacted on **health and wellbeing** in the neighbourhood?

The Future

15. In the **future**, how would you like to develop the work you do with the Friends group?
16. And, how do you see the future of the Friends group?

Inequalities

17. Thinking more broadly, do you think having voluntary groups involved in looking after green spaces is a positive thing?
- Are there any potential downsides?
 - Do you think it could lead to some areas having better green spaces than others?
18. Do you have anything more to add?

Appendix 5.11: Interactions with Friends of Wilde Meadows

<p>2018</p> <p><i>1st June 2018 (first meet / focus group with TBCF) – in linked case study</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fieldnotes and recording / transcript</i> • <i>Photographs</i> • <i>Follow on email</i> <p>22nd June 2018 (pond activity)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldnotes – including informal interviews with participants and organisers • Photographs <p>Email Interview – summer 2018</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saved as word document <p>19th September 2018 – walk, talk, cuppa in McDonald's</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldnotes • Follow up email from D • D's handwritten notes <p>December 2018- tree planting (including two partner organisations)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldnotes 	<p>2019/2020</p> <p>Jan 2019</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email from Diane re hedge, with photos <p>March 2019 (YCC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with Martin (transcript and consent form) • News item <p>March 2019 - walk / talk with 2 team members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldnotes • Follow up email from Diane • Photos <p>March 2019 – litter pick with 4/5 people plus council ranger</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes <p>June 2019</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcript and recording of formal interview with Diane • Field notes and transcription <p>September 2019 (18th) – Flood Alleviation Community Event</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldnotes and leaflets <p>September 2019 (19th) – community arts group and community hub</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes and leaflet from art project <p>December 2020 - telephone conversation with Diane</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typed up notes
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Appendix 5.12 Interactions with Raven Hill

2018	2019	2021
June Met Hazel at YCC Community Farm to discuss the project and my involvement. Attained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project info • Meeting notes 	March – Visit 3 to RH Clean up / activity day (children painting rocks). Attended by local residents (children, teens, one adult), Hazel from YCC and Y from youth organisation. Had a cup of tea / chat at Victoria's house. Field-notes made.	April – Interview with YCC Telephone interview with Hazel from YCC. To discuss project progress / impact of Covid.
July – Visit 1 to Raven Hill Participated in a clean-up of RH. Attended by local residents (adults and children), YCC, a youth organisation, housing organisation, the police and councillors. Various conversations. Field-notes made.	June – Visit 4 to RH Interviewed Victoria in her house – face to face. Notes kept, transcript made of recording. June – Visit 5 to RH Attended a YCC filming at RH. Hazel had asked me to talk about the benefits of Green Volunteering. Met another YCC employee. Field-notes made	May – Visit 8 to RH I went to meet Hazel and Adam at RH to see how the site had progressed. We chatted informally whilst working on the herb beds that had been installed. Another YCC trainee was also there. I didn't meet any members of the public. Field notes kept.
December – Visit 2 to RH Met YCC and youth organisation in supermarket café. Went to RH with them to help run a wreath-making activity. Attended by local children. Chatted to them and parent. Field-notes made.	October – Visit 6 to RH Met Hazel, another YCC employee plus their Young Leaders – at Tesco café then for a fungi foray at RH. Field-notes made.	
	December – Visit 7 to RH Attended a volunteering day at RH, with YCC. One other volunteer attended.	

Appendix 5.13: Park manager recruitment flyer

(LBU logo)

Dear Parks Manager,

Do you have experience of working with Friends of Parks or Green Spaces groups, particularly in deprived areas?

If so, I'd greatly appreciate your involvement in the 'People and Parks' research. This explores how Local Authorities and 'Friends of' Groups work together to maintain and improve urban green spaces. As someone who works directly with these groups, I'd love to hear your views.

Taking part would involve being interviewed by myself at a time and place convenient to you. I'd ask you about your experiences of working with Friends groups, your views on the benefits and challenges and what you see as success factors for a productive relationship. Please note all findings will remain anonymous.

[Contact information redacted, June 2024]

Appendix 5.14: Park manager interview schedule

Emphasise:

- Introduce myself clearly – emphasise that I’m an independent researcher who is funded by the university i.e. I don’t answer to anyone in the Local Authority (LA) world.
- I’m here to understand how Park Managers (PMs) work with Friends groups – what works well, what doesn’t work well. I’m not an expert in how LAs work or Park Teams work and I’m not here to criticise anyone or any organisation – I’m here to listen and find out more.
- Whatever you say is anonymous, I won’t ever mention your name or the name of the LA when I’m talking to anyone or when I’m writing anything up. What I will do is draw out themes that you and other PMs raise and present these anonymously.
- Do you have any questions?

Personal background

1. How did you come to work in Parks?
 - How long? Route in (training / studying)?
 - Thinking back, why did you want to work in this area?

Role and Responsibilities

2. Can you describe your **current role** to me?
 - What area do you cover?
 - What are your main responsibilities?
3. Who or what **governs** what the Parks team do? (Key strategies?)
4. **Who** do you mainly work with?
 - Other departments in the LA?
5. (How has your role as a PM changed over time?)
6. What are the main **pressures** you face? (where from?)

Relationship with Friends Groups

7. How would you describe your **responsibilities** in relation to Friends groups?
 - Does this include helping set up / support FGs? (If not them, who?)
8. Could you describe to me **how** you work with a FG?
 - How do you decide on what actions to take / what the priorities are?
 - How do you communicate with each other?

9. Can you give me an **example** of when working with a FG has gone **well**?
 - Probe: why did it work well in this case?
10. What **benefits** do you think they bring generally? (skills / knowledge / access to funding)
11. Do you have any **examples** of when working with a FG has **not** gone well?
 - Why do you think that was?
 - Thinking back, what would have helped it work better?
12. What do you think the key **challenges** are?
13. **What helps** make a **good** working relationship?
14. What do you think affects how successful a Friends Group is?
 - The area? Is there a difference between poorer and richer places?
 - The people? What types of people make effective Friends group members?
 - Anything else?

Issues raised

When I've spoken to FGs from up and down the country they've raised a few issues about working with Local Authorities. Can I ask what you think of these, as someone who works for a LA?

15. Some groups feel that LAs don't listen to them enough and don't take their views on-board when making decisions. (An example might be over where some play equipment is put). What do you think about this?
16. Another thing that some groups say is that they find LAs bureaucratic and inflexible to deal with. (An example might be that they have some funding to change something in the park but the LA won't let them). What do you think about this?
17. (Some think that LAs don't always communicate what their plans are so they'll often find things out too late or by accident. This can make them feel not valued. What do you think about this?)

Training and Support

18. Going back to yourself, have you had any **training** in how to work with Friends Groups?
 - Probe: How helpful it was / what would be helpful
19. What **support** is there for you and the Parks team in how you work with Friends Groups?
 - What would you like there to be?

The Future

20. Going forward, what would you like to **improve** in terms of how FGs and LAs work together?
- How do you think this could be done?
21. Finally, is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I've not asked about?

Appendix 5.15: Topics to explore with parks teams (Woodward, 2019)



Appendix 5.16: Participant information sheet for developing groups



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HEALTH &
COMMUNITY STUDIES

People and Parks Research

Thank you for reading this. It should help you decide if you would like to take part in the 'People and Parks' research. If you have any questions, please contact me using the details overleaf.

ABOUT ME

This research is being done by me, Jenny Woodward, as part of a PhD study. I work as a Researcher in the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University.

The PhD is supervised by Jane South, Professor of Healthy Communities and Pinki Sahota, Professor of Childhood Obesity.

THE RESEARCH

Parks and urban green spaces are an important part of people's lives and help improve health and wellbeing. Community groups, such as 'Friends of Parks', play a valuable role in maintaining and improving these places.

This research is aiming to find out how local community groups work with Local Authorities to keep these places well maintained and used.

The study will find out:

- What community groups do to improve and maintain their local green space
- How the groups got started and how they sustain their activity
- How this affects the health and wellbeing of the community
- How community groups work with Local Authorities

WHAT WILL I BE DOING?

I will be interviewing members of seven different groups and observing some of their activities. Some of these groups are just starting out, whilst others have been established for a number of years. All of them help maintain or improve a green space in an urban area.

Later on, I will interview people who work in the Health and Parks departments of Local Authorities.

HOW CAN YOU TAKE PART?

As a group that is just starting out, I'd like to see how things go, with your group, over the next couple of years. Depending on what you are okay with, I'd like to;

- Interview key members once or twice a year. This might last about 1 hour and will involve us having a chat about how things are going.
- Observe / help out at activities the group may be running.
- Do 'mini' interviews with other people involved in the group, for example, volunteers or participants at events.
- Read any documents or policies you might write.

We will talk about your neighbourhood and your community group. Questions will be about things like; what your groups wants to achieve, what is has done so far, where it has struggled, how it is run, who has helped you and if you think it has.

Recording the interview

I would like to record the conversations so I can listen properly to what you say and know the findings are accurate. However, I will check with you first and, if you are not happy with this, I will take notes instead. The recordings are only listened to by myself and my research supervisors. They are written up and, once the research is complete, they are destroyed.

YOUR CONSENT

Taking part in the research is voluntary. You can refuse to take part at all or to answer certain questions. Before taking part, I will ask you for your informed consent, by completing a short form. If you change your mind about taking part afterwards, you can withdraw what you have said up until when I start to analyse the findings – after that it becomes difficult to separate everything out. You can do this by contacting one of the people listed at the end of this leaflet.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION?

I am very careful with the information you give to me. Any electronic information (e.g. the recordings and files of the write ups) will be saved securely on a university computer that is password protected. Anything on paper will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. I will ask if you are happy for us to keep in touch (on the consent form) but I will never pass your information onto anyone outside the research team.

ANONYMITY

I hope to use some of the things that you say in a PhD thesis, at conferences or in academic papers.

No real names will be used, so no-one can be identified – this includes names of people, the community group or the neighbourhood. Anything that you tell me will be kept confidential. However, if you say something that makes me worry about your safety or the safety of someone else I will pass this on to relevant authorities. If any

photographs of the area or the site are taken, I will make sure no-one can be recognised and no features that could identify the area to others are included.

The study has been confirmed as following agreed ethics procedures by a Leeds Beckett University ethics coordinator.

CONTACT DETAILS

(provided – taken out here)

Appendix 5.17: Developing group consent form

People and Parks Research

Consent Form

	Please tick
I have read the information sheet for this research	
I have had the chance to answer questions and am satisfied with the answers	
I understand that, if I agree, any interviews will be recorded (audio only) and then written down	
I understand that, if I agree, at certain events the researcher may take hand-written notes about the activity	
I understand that, if I agree, the researcher can look at written documents or social media posts from the group	
I understand that taking part is voluntary and I can withdraw up until three months after the event or interview	
I know that all the information about me (and other participants) will remain private and confidential and is stored securely	
I know that the research could be published in a PhD thesis or in academic papers / conferences, but no identifying details will be included and all quotations will be anonymous	
I agree to take part in the People and Parks research	

Name (in capitals)	Signature	Date
To be completed each time an interview takes place or 6 months has passed.		

Appendix 5.18: Text for observation poster

Copy for observation poster (to be displayed during the observation).

‘People and Parks’ Research

The activity session in *(named park)* is being observed today by Jenny Woodward from Leeds Beckett University. This is for a PhD study looking at how community groups help maintain and improve green spaces in towns and cities. Jenny will be wearing a Leeds Beckett purple top and have an ID badge so you can identify her.

What will Jenny be doing?

Jenny will be taking part in the activities today and observing what is happening. She is interested in what types of activities the group does, why people take part and what the benefits are.

Jenny would like to chat to you briefly if you are willing to do so. She will not be writing down the names of people or recording the conversations. If she takes any photographs it will not include any recognisable people or identifiable features.

If you do not want to be involved, please let Jenny or *XXXX (gatekeeper)* know – she will respect your request for privacy.

What happens to the information collected today?

Everything collected today is kept confidential – no one outside the research team will see it.

Findings from the research, without any names or identifying information, will be included in Jenny’s PhD thesis, academic papers and conference presentations.

Planned focus group

If you would like to be part of a focus group discussion about your community group – how it got started, how it keeps going and what the benefits are, please let Jenny or *XXXX (gatekeeper)* know. One will be arranged, for this community group, in the near future at a convenient time and place.

Please ask Jenny or XXXX (gatekeeper) if you have any questions.

Contact details:

Appendix 5.19: Risk assessment form

The potential hazard	Who might be harmed and how	Relevant experience and skills	Control Measures
<p>Travelling to fieldwork locations</p>	<p>The researcher could have an accident or get lost and end up in an unknown area.</p> <p>Likelihood – low</p> <p>How serious - medium</p>	<p>Experienced driver (>30 years with no accidents), used to finding and travelling to new destinations.</p>	<p>I will abide by the University Travel Policy.</p> <p>I will use public transport when appropriate / safe to do so.</p> <p>If the location is difficult to reach by public transport I will drive. I will use my own car which has a valid MOT, is regularly serviced, in good repair and has breakdown cover. I will park my car close to the destination in a well-lit area. I will follow the highway code.</p> <p>I will plan my journey in advance, allow plenty of time and travel during day-light hours. If the weather is very bad I won't travel.</p> <p>A 'buddy' system with my partner will be used. I will let him know where I am going, when I should be back and he will call me if I don't contact him.</p> <p>I will have my mobile phone with me at all times – this has a map function so I can use this to navigate, should I get lost. I will only do this whilst the car is stationary.</p>
<p>Visiting urban green spaces</p>			<p>I will plan my trips beforehand, in conjunction with a community group. I will arrange to meet them</p>

	<p>The researcher could come in contact with strangers or dogs.</p> <p>As the venues are all public parks / woodlands it is unlikely the venues themselves will be unsafe.</p> <p>Likelihood – low Seriousness - medium</p>	<p>Regular traveller who has conducted research in many deprived areas.</p> <p>I am trained in how to interact with dogs from forest school volunteering.</p>	<p>there and ask them of any hazards I should be aware of. I will not interact with dogs unless I've had a discussion with the owner.</p> <p>If I feel uncomfortable / unsafe I will leave the green space and go to a busy public area (e.g. café) and then arrange transport home. I will make sure I have the phone number of a local taxi company so I can leave quickly if needed.</p> <p>'Buddy' system utilised as above. My partner will be aware of who I am meeting and where.</p>
Interviewing or conducting focus groups with community group members	<p>The researcher - interviewing members of the public who could become aggressive / threatening.</p> <p>Likelihood – low Seriousness - high</p>	<p>Experienced researcher (more than 10 years) who has interviewed dozens of people in different circumstances.</p>	<p>I will abide by the university lone working policy.</p> <p>'Buddy' system as detailed above – partner will know where I am / who I am interviewing.</p> <p>The community group leader will suggest people to interview so there will be a personal recommendation. The groups themselves will have been recommended to me and will be 'public' to a certain extent.</p> <p>I will conduct the interviews either in a public building (for example a café or a community centre) or in the urban green space. In both cases other people will be present.</p> <p>I will identify an escape route beforehand and, should I feel uncomfortable, finish the interview quickly and leave.</p>

<p>Taking part in the maintenance / improvement of urban green spaces</p>	<p>Researcher / others. I could injure myself or others using a space / digging (or similar).</p> <p>Likelihood – low Seriousness - low</p>	<p>I am physically fit, garden regularly (using various tools) and volunteer at forest schools.</p>	<p>I will only undertake 'lighter' tasks that are within my capabilities (e.g. digging / planting / pruning etc.).</p> <p>I will only use tools that I feel able to use (e.g. spades / clippers) and won't undertake any tasks I do not feel safe doing e.g. tree felling / moving heavy rocks.</p> <p>I will wear appropriate footwear for light gardening i.e. approach shoes or walking boots.</p> <p>When planning my visit I will make sure I know the location of the nearest A&E.</p> <p>I will ensure my tetanus is up to date. I will not handle dog mess and will take wet wipes in case of getting dirty hands.</p> <p>Should the weather be particularly adverse (e.g. very heavy rain, wind or snow) I will not take part - field work is only taking place during the Spring / Summer / Autumn (i.e. not the winter).</p>
<p>Issues / tensions between community group members</p>	<p>Community group members – if local issues cause tension during a focus group / other interaction.</p> <p>Likelihood – low Seriousness - medium</p>	<p>Researcher is an experienced researcher who has conducted focus groups on many more sensitive topics.</p>	<p>I will be attuned and sensitive to the mood / vibe of the group. If tensions arise during a group discussion I will seek to move the topic on and will not probe any further.</p> <p>Group members will be notified at the beginning of a focus group that the conversation is confidential and, anything personal that is said /</p>

			<p>discussed in the group should not be made public / discussed with others.</p> <p>If there is still tension between the group, I will inform the community group leader, if I judge that is appropriate.</p>
Reputation of the group affected by the research.	<p>The community group – in terms of their standing locally / with funding organisations.</p> <p>Likelihood – low Seriousness - low</p>	Researcher is trained in anonymising research findings.	<p>The recordings will be transcribed with existing names of people and the group. However, at the point of analysis / report writing names will be removed. This will mean those reading the report cannot identify individuals or groups.</p>

Appendix 5.20: Data collected and generated with established groups

Group	Contextual data (already in existence prior to visits)	Data generated during the research
Hardy Rec (HR)	<p>Friends documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> History of the Friends Friends newsletters List of activities, events, key improvements Chronology of community involvement <p>Park documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walking maps Leaflets from associated groups e.g. clubs / groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Photos of park's key features Interview with two Friends – paired, seated interview and single walking interview (recorded and transcribed) Fieldnotes and reflections
Norton Park (NP)	<p>Friends documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business /Action plan Constitution Policies Annual report <p>Park documents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaflets – hard copy only. 6 'before and after' photos Book on history of park – summary of text written. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notes from initial conversation (before visit) Field-notes from walk / talk Photographs from walk and talk. Interview / focus group with Leaders and Group Members (x4). Recorded and transcribed.
Tarn Beck Community Forum (TBCF)	<p>Friends documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two newspaper articles Group chronology Data-stick containing information on group's activities <p>Park documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walking map / leaflet x 2 Management Plan Organogram photo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus group with leaders and members x 4. Recorded and transcribed. Telephone interview with Leader. Recorded and transcribed. Face to face interview with committee member. Recorded and transcribed. Photos of green space
Gaskell Park (GP)	<p>Park documents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> List of café events Leaflet – play trail / walking map 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group conversation in café -5 or 6 people participating inc Chair. Recorded and transcribed. 'Walk and Talk' with two members. Recorded and transcribed Interview (face to face) with committee member / partner organisation. Recorded and transcribed. Reflective field notes

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Photographs of park
River Round (RR)	Park documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Map (hard copy) – map, various walk guides, nature spotting notes. Friends documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newspaper articles x 2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fieldnotes from activity day Photos of activity day and area Phone interview with key member. Recorded and transcribed.

Appendix 5.21: Data generated with developing groups

	Friends of Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
Fieldnotes	Ten sets of fieldnotes – handwritten, later typed.	Eight sets of fieldnotes – handwritten, later typed.
Photos (researcher)	Three sets of photos	Two sets of photos
Interview recordings and transcripts	Two recordings and transcripts	Two recordings and transcripts
Interview emails	One exchange of emails – I would send a few questions via email, participant would reply. This was then repeated.	N/A
Emails from participant	Four – with attached photos	N/A
Printed material	Leaflets relating to green space improvement	Project leaflets and flyers, map and newsletters
Other	Handwritten note of activities (from participant) News item	N/A

Appendix 5.22: Local authority coding framework

Numbers in brackets related to the number of references for that code in NVivo file

Main code	Sub-codes
Context (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Personal histories (brief)</i> (6) • Budget cuts / lack of resources (9) • Impact on morale / sadness (4) • Statutory (or not) (2) • Recent recognition of importance of Parks / Green Spaces (1)
LA Way of working (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate teams (tension?) (11) • Systematic planning (11) • Role of politics / advocacy (11) • Resistance to change (2)
Relationship with FGs (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive emotions about working with FGs – appreciation, respect, valuing (24) • Negative emotions – irritation, frustration, anger, annoyance (18) • Mercenary attitude (5) • ‘Good’ vs ‘difficult’ – choose who they work with (10)
Benefits of FGs – hands on tasks, advocacy, bidding, other (30)	
Issues (leading to difficulties between FGs / Las)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mismatch in expectations (being demanding) (9) • Lack understanding (of how Las now work) (6) • Abrasive individuals / rudeness (10) • Sustainability (maintenance) (11) • Within group problems (5) • Between group problems (contested spaces) (6) • Power and control (of space) - one-upmanship – proving who is right (21) • Other (3)
Role of Parks teams (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up / supporting (27) • Steering / limiting (8) • Encouraging networking (13) • Lack time / resource / know-how (skills) (LAs) (15)
Good practice / how to work together (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear communication / build understanding / relationships (20) • Working with other teams (in council) (4) • Working in partnership (6) • Other - Small grants (0)
<u>Lack of representation</u> amongst FGs (age / ethnicity / interest) (7)	
<u>Deprived</u> vs affluent areas (8)	

Appendix 6.1: Scores for each Friends Group by aspect of success

	Friends of Hardy Rec	Friends of Norton Park	TBCF	Friends of Gaskell Park	Friends of River Round	Wilde Meadows	Raven Hill
GS Improvements 5/5 = transformational 4/5 = substantial 3/5 = significant 2/5 – some change 1/5 – limited	Very high (5/5) – transformed in terms of facilities, safety, maintenance. Large bid – successful.	Very high (5/5) – transformed in terms of facilities, safety, maintenance. Raised more than £0.7m	high (4/5) – setting up of LNRs, access paths. Part of successful large bid.	Significant (4/5) – café, activities, trails. Maintenance less affected. Small pots of money successfully bid for (e.g. £5k)	Significant (3/5) – paths and waterways better maintained. Have some funds but small amounts.	Some success but more limited (2/5). Better maintained – less litter. Issues reported and then dealt with. Some activities. Small bids successful.	N/A as RA did not get going. GS was improved but by partner organisation.
Encouraging community involvement	Very high (5/5). Multiple groups operating in park plus broad community support.	High (3/5). LP encouraged to take ownership / participate. Broad community support.	2/5. Group petitioned council but top-down organised. Limited success after.	3/5. Some community members very active but quite small team.	3/5. Lots of volunteers participating. Not as many 'activists' created though.	2/5. Some individuals involved but limited numbers / activism.	N/A as RA did not get going. Some improvement in activism but led by partner.
Benefitting volunteers / participants	Hard to assess but probable (4/5) Lots of people setting up groups / helping in hub etc.	4/5. Hard to assess but feel part of a team / something good.	2/5. Limited volunteers.	4/5. Strong sense of team / community. Social and sense of purpose benefits.	5/5. Social / H&WB benefits for participants.	1/5. Limited volunteers.	N/A as RA did not get going.
Benefitting Leaders	Very High (5/5) Sense of	High (4/5) – sense of	High (3/5) – purpose,	Quite high (4	High (4/5).	2/5. Significant impact on	N/A As RA did not get going.

	purpose / fulfilment.	purpose, fulfilment, community. But stress too.	enjoyed winning battles. Not life-changing through.	/5). Purpose, social, but strains on key leaders.	Purpose, social, love of place. But some stress.	leader (social / H&WB) plus activated. But significant strains.	
Relationship with LA.	4/5 Very positive, despite some challenges. Reached good understanding. Collaborated well together.	2/5 Largely negative. High levels of frustration. Though success with n'hood team.	1/5 Very high levels of tension.	1/5 Very poor relationship. High levels of tension.	2/5 frustrations (with contractors) but some positive aspects.	1/5 Very high levels of tension. Led to group ending.	N/A
Longevity of FG	5/5. Long-term group with structures in place. possibly too dependent on key individuals.	3/5. Long-term group but very dependent on key individuals.	2/5 Group lasted fair time but depending on key individuals.	3/5. Long-term group but too dependent on key people.	3/5. Whilst dependent on some key people feels like enough volunteers that scope to broaden support.	1/5 Weak group, not enough members.	n/A
	28	21	14	19	20	9	

Appendix 7.1: Key characteristics of Group Leaders (at time of visit).

<i>Friends of Hardy Rec (Established 17 years)</i>
<p>Role: Chair since 2001 – involved in setting up FG, still involved now</p> <p>Gender / approx. age: Male, in his 60s. Became involved late 40s.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Insider – lives locally, Chair of Residents' Association.</p> <p>Background / profession: Community activist, blue-collar worker / unemployed.</p> <p>Initial motivation for involvement: Seeing other examples of community empowerment locally / belief in power of communities</p> <p>Other community roles: National campaigner for parks and community empowerment, Chair of Residents Association.</p>
<i>Friends of Norton Park (Established 15 years)</i>
<p>Roles: Two key individuals (married couple) - Chair and Communications Manager / Director. Plus Secretary. All since 2003</p> <p>Gender / approx. age: Male and female couple in 60s (50s at start). Secretary – male, in his 80s.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Insiders. Longstanding connections to Park. Chair used to visit as child. Secretaries house overlooks park / first job was there.</p> <p>Background / profession: Two main individuals - retired Police Officers, one crime prevention specialist. Secretary – retired teacher.</p> <p>Initial motivation for involvement: Retired, looking for something to do. Saddened to see Park in poor state – opportunity to “<i>put something back in</i>”.</p> <p>Other community roles: Volunteer for Riding for Disabled.</p>
<i>Friends of the River Round</i>
<p>Roles: Leads work-days plus outreach work (not on committee). Instigated group, few years ago.</p> <p>Gender / approximate age: Male, 60s.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Unclear –involved in waterways but not specific area.</p> <p>Background / profession: Engineer for telecoms company. Worked in office / on-site. Expertise in managing work teams.</p> <p>Initial motivation for involvement: Recently retired – looking for social contact / team working. Enjoyed volunteering for funded project that was ending, so offered to run the FG.</p> <p>Other community roles: Volunteers for a charity that runs a barge for people with learning difficulties and a wildlife charity that surveys the river for otters.</p>
<i>Gaskell Park (established 15 years)</i>
<p>Roles: Chair (since 2004), Vice-Chair (since 2014), Café Manager (since 2016) plus others.</p> <p>Gender / approximate ages: All three key individuals - females, in 50s and 60s. Others are male. Chair got involved when in her 30s – had young child.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Insiders – two live locally and use regularly. One works and lives locally.</p> <p>Backgrounds / professions: All professionals. Chair – unknown profession. Vice Chair - CEO of Charity. Café Manager - retired teacher.</p> <p>Motivations for involvement: Desire park to be a better place for local people – altruism. To improve community cohesion. Social justice – local people deserve better green space.</p> <p>Other community roles: Involved in local Church</p>
<i>Tarn Beck Community Forum</i>
Roles: Centre Manager and Project Manager

<p>Gender / approximate age: Male – 70s (50s when initially involved)</p> <p>In or Outsider: Outsiders. Live some distance away.</p> <p>Background / profession: Senior level City Council employees in planning and regeneration. Campaigner / Trade Unionist.</p> <p>Initial motivations for involvement: Previous successful campaign to improve river – aiming to continue work. To help improve “working-class communities” engagement with politics.</p> <p>Retired early – wanted to “make things happen” without bureaucracy.</p> <p>Other community roles: Unknown</p>
<i>Friends of Wilde Meadows (developing)</i>
<p>Roles: Chair, since start.</p> <p>Gender / approximate age: Chair – female, 60s.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Insider – Chair lives locally, visits the space daily – since had young child.</p> <p>Background / profession: Unclear, currently retired, did work in a library.</p> <p>Initial motivation for involvement: Love of the meadows, desire to take care of them. Love of nature.</p> <p>Other community roles: Trustee of local community hub, leads a walking group, stood for election as a Councillor. Environmental campaigner.</p>
<i>Raven Hill (did not become established)</i>
<p>Roles: No group was established by project end. Profile based on potential leader identified by partner organisations</p> <p>Gender / approximate age: Female, 40s.</p> <p>In or Outsider: Insider – lives next to green space. Local resident for approx. decade.</p> <p>Background / profession: Does not do paid work - has a disability / health problems and children (single parent)</p> <p>Initial motivation for involvement: To make a safe space for her children to play in.</p> <p>Other community roles: None</p>

Appendix 10.1: Full list of recommendations

Recommendations: Set A Improving knowledge of the Friends Group phenomena		Friends Groups	Local authorities	Policy Makers	Researchers
1	Set up systems to capture consistent data on the prevalence and distribution (by neighbourhood) of Friends Groups, with an environmental justice lens.		x	x	x
2	Gather more comprehensive information on the demographics of Friends (age, class, gender, ethnicity, area etc.).		x	x	x
3	Capture data on the activities that Friends Groups do, to appreciate their worth. To include value to individuals, the space, the community and authorities. Approach taken needs to be simple and not time consuming for groups. Should link to recommendation A:1.		x	x	x
4	Assess the health and wellbeing impact on Friends of their involvement. Including leaders and members with more peripheral involvement.		x	x	x

Recommendations: Set B Strengthening and building the resilience of Friends Groups		Friends Groups	Local authorities	Policy Makers	Researchers
1	Ensure there are regular activities, held at consistent times, that people can engage with and build into their routines.	x			
2	Build sociability into activities. This is not a distraction from what you are doing, but key to building the group. Try to connect people together, to help them form friendships. Local authorities to ensure this need is recognised in funding / activity planning.	x	x		
3	Keep trying to draw new people into the group, in whatever capacity suits them – committee members, active volunteers, supporters or observers. Avoid becoming too insular. Focus	x	x		x

	<p>on including those who are passionate about the space and have fond memories of it.</p> <p>Local authorities to 'signpost' potential members / encourage these connections.</p> <p>Researchers to explore with groups what approaches to recruitment work best.</p>				
4	<p>Ensure the group holds regular meetings that everyone can attend, and have certain key policies. These do not need to be onerous or very formal but do need to be publicly available and accessible to everyone.</p> <p>Local authorities to support this by providing resources e.g. templates, places to meet.</p>	x	x		
5	<p>Act on what interests and motivates groups, as long as it benefits the green space and the community.</p> <p>Local authorities to respect a group's choices and facilitate where possible.</p>	x	x		
6	<p>Ensure there is a source of funding for groups that is easy to access / automatically available once constituted. This does not need to be large amounts.</p>		x		
7	<p>Develop a 'network' of support for groups. Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • other community groups in the neighbourhood • other Friends Groups • specialist organisations that may be able to help with particular skills or interests. <p>Local authorities to encourage these connections via forums, brokers or other similar mechanisms.</p>	x	x	x	
8	<p>Think about how the group might cope if key individuals leave – and consider planning for that.</p> <p>Local authority neighbourhood / community teams to help facilitate this process.</p>	x	x		
9	<p>Ensure groups maintain independence in terms of decision making.</p> <p>Local authorities to respect this independence and try not to influence the direction of the group (though they can advise on what is / is not practicable).</p>	x	x		
10	<p>Identify, via listening to groups, what support they need. And, where possible, adjust practice accordingly. Monitor city-wide, levels of satisfaction with the support provided (family and friends type question).</p>		x		

11	If a group becomes – or is about to become – inactive, seek to understand why. This is an ideal moment to capture their perspective on the support received / what could be improved. Use independent researchers to explore.	x	x		x

Recommendations: Set C		Friends Groups	Local authorities	Policy Makers	Researchers
Shift the mindset of local authorities and park staff towards greater control for Friends Groups and improved relationships between the organisations.					
1	Leadership to demonstrate, and build into policies, that more relational working is encouraged.		x	x	
2	Give staff the time and space, where possible, to make personal connections with existing / potential Friends Groups. Build this into performance metrics and work planning.		x	x	
3	Include community engagement skills into key competencies – and the recruitment and training - of park staff.		x	x	
4	Understand the barriers to relational working and, where possible, reduce them e.g. flexible working.		x		x
5	Re-design systems and bureaucracy to remove any unnecessary barriers to working with the community.	x	x		
6	Park staff to work more closely with other related directorates and services within local authorities e.g. neighbourhood, community, public health.		x		
7	Ensure there is clarity in regard to the role of Friends Groups, including their remit and the expectations on both parties etc. This needs to be individual to each group, depending on their capabilities, and agreed together (see also B:9)	x	x		
9	Ensure staff appreciate that communities 'own' green spaces, and authorities role is to maintain and care for them, for the community.		x	x	
10	Facilitate a network of support for Friends Groups, such as a forum or community brokers. Potentially provided independently.		x	x	
11	Conduct more in-depth research into how park teams currently work with Friends Groups to understand their perspective. Investigate their everyday experiences via ethnographic approaches.		x	x	x

12	Develop understanding of how a change in mindset might occur / be encouraged within park teams. Possibly via action-research or embedded researchers.		x	x	x
Recommendations: Set D Ensuring the system reduces inequality of green space		Friends Groups	Local authorities	Policy Makers	Researchers
1	Ensure park staff are cognisant of the issue of inequality, including how it affects people's ability to undertake civic action and the responsibilities of local authorities to tackle this.		x		
2	Help park staff develop their skills working with groups in disadvantaged areas, potentially via linking with community and neighbourhood directorates (see also C:6).		x		
3	Offer additional support to groups in disadvantaged areas, including helping them form, build capacity and cope with set-backs. This needs to be tailored to their particular assets, needs and circumstances and can be done in partnership with other organisations / services (see C:6).		x	x	
4	Similar to above, support individuals in disadvantaged areas who show an interest in being involved – by offering mentoring, training and skills development. Again, via working in partnership with community groups / other directorates.		x		
5	Equip park teams with the skills to 'resist' being pulled into offering additional support to already capable groups.		x		
6	Encourage links between Friends Groups, so that groups with particular resources, capabilities and skills can help those without.	x	x		
7	Aim to understand more fully how ethnicity affects participation in Friends Groups. To include current prevalence of ethnic minorities, barriers to involvement and strategies to increase engagement.		x	x	x

Recommendations Set E: Improving spaces to increase engagement		Friends Groups	Local authorities	Policy Makers	Researchers
1	Help groups, especially newer ones, to tackle antisocial behaviour. For example increased patrols, surveillance, dealing promptly with fly-tipping / littering.	x	x	x	
2	Explore how spaces can be designed and maintained so the needs of nature and of humans to feel safe can be balanced.		x	x	x
3	Explore how informal spaces can be altered to increase engagement with local residents, including features, events etc.		x	x	x
4	Continue exploring how attitudes to natural, more wild spaces, can be altered, so people, especially those living in deprived areas can feel more comfortable there.			x	x