

Executive Summary: Park
Principles for Glasgow, 'The Dear
Green Place'



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1.0 Introduction

Over the past eighteen months the value of urban parks to Scottish residents has been undeniable. With approximately half of this period spent in lockdown, with residents unable to travel greater than five miles to minimise the spread of Coronavirus, parks have proven a welcomed oasis. Citizens' increasing engagement with these green spaces evoked greater awareness of Glasgow's parks' social value thus highlighting the significance of this investigation in determining the multifaceted ways in which social value is attributed to the city's greenspace.

With increasingly denuded resources impacting upon Glasgow City Council's budget, the study explored alternative management strategies aimed at empowering citizens and community groups whilst reducing financial pressure on the local authority. Community groups' desire to adopt greater management responsibility over these greenspaces was also investigated with interview discussion informing the creation of a set of principles aimed at enhancing Glasgow's parks partnerships.

This report summarises the investigation's key findings. Though the scope of the study was limited by the current COVID-19 pandemic which impeded the recruitment of interviewees, an understanding of resident and community groups' engagement within Glasgow's parks was effectively established through an extensive document analysis and numerous online interviews. The findings confirm the significance of this research, albeit as an initial investigation into Glasgow's parks, with the principles proposed aiming to ensure the continued success and sustainability of these greenspaces.

2.0 Methodology

To study the city's parks a qualitative research approach was adopted involving online interviews and document analysis. Ethical approval was sought prior to conducting the study and following these guidelines closely ensured rigor and reliability throughout the research. Fifteen resident and ten expert interviews were conducted online with individuals from local community groups, housing associations and Glasgow City Council, aiming to establish Glasgow's parks' social value and community group desire for more management responsibility over these greenspaces. Document analysis of various open and green space strategy publications from across the UK provided insight into the most effective park management approaches. Together, this analysis alongside interview data informed the creation of the proposed park principles.



3.1 Key Findings: The Social Value

Throughout Glasgow, parks provide a green haven of wildlife and biodiversity which all participants referred to as vital to the city. However, further investigation revealed such assets are of greater social value to citizens than merely a visually appealing space. Access to these natural environments within the urban landscape proved particularly significant over the past eighteen months when travel restrictions limited individuals' engagement with nature outwith the city. Themes of health and wellbeing, belonging and identity emerged throughout the interviews demonstrating residents' increasing awareness of the social value of Glasgow's parks and indicating why these features are such an emotive issue.

3.1.1 Physical Health

Health and wellbeing proved one of the most significant themes throughout resident interviews with participants noting a considerable increase in their park use for fitness purposes since the beginning of lockdown. Glasgow's variety of park types and features presents numerous opportunities for sport and activity with interviewees referring to cycling, football and marathon training as recent reasons for park use. Participating in both individual and team sports enables citizens to improve their physical health, affirming Glasgow's Open Space Strategy's (2020) assertion that the presence of good quality greenspace encourages 'exercise, active travel and play' (p.32). The significant role of these assets as a means for improving physical health is confirmed by interviewees' increasing park use during the COVID-19 pandemic.



3.1.2 Mental Wellbeing

Participants also noted that accessing Glasgow's parks was vital to their mental health during the pandemic, with several interviewees drawing a direct correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and their increased awareness of the value of greenspace. In addition to the wellbeing benefits individuals experience from direct engagement within greenspace, the associated opportunities parks present for community group participation also serves to improve mental health. It was suggested that amongst particular 'Friends of' groups, discussion surrounding mental health and greenspace had become topical, demonstrating citizens' increasing awareness of urban parks' benefit to societal wellbeing and confirming Samuelsson et al.'s (2020) comment that parks offered a space for mental health improvement during the pandemic. Interviewees therefore confirmed the various health and wellbeing benefits which academic literature and Glasgow City Council's publications attribute to greenspace, indicating residents' changing perceptions of parks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.



3.1.3 Belonging and Identity

The social value of Glasgow's parks also emerged through themes of belonging and identity. As the backdrop to various social practices, interviewees identified Glasgow's parks as a place to meet friends, read and enjoy a coffee, confirming Bolleter and Ramalho's (2020) suggestion that parks play host to a myriad of social processes. Engaging in such behaviours evokes a sense of belonging which was referenced by certain interviewees who commented on their personal attachment to the city's parks, having visited regularly when they were younger and returning with their children more recently to share these experiences.

Participants within the parks' community groups also referred to this sense of belonging and identity. Despite these groups' primary objective focusing upon park maintenance, it was suggested that volunteers rely upon the social interaction and network presented by park community groups. This confirms Dinnie et al.'s (2012) assertion that volunteering in greenspace provides a sense of purpose and identity to individuals. Such opportunities for public participation within the city's parks reinforces the connection between people and place, helping citizens establish a sense of identity within their local neighbourhood and once more confirming the social value of Glasgow's parks.



3.2 Key Findings: The Appetite for Greater Management Responsibility

3.2.1 Management Strategies

Various management strategies exist within Glasgow's parks which promote community intervention and collaboration throughout the city's greenspace. Differences in management approaches emerged between local and city parks with variations in the presence and absence of community groups and anchor organisations. Co-management emerged in certain city parks where the involvement of a community anchor organisation helped to optimise the park asset by sharing responsibilities with non-state actors, as seen in the management of Alexandra Park's sports hub. In contrast, a hybrid governance approach appeared most valuable within the local parks studied. This approach ensures ownership and responsibility remain with the local authority however facilitates collaboration between state and non-state partners promoting cross-sectoral knowledge-share and democratic decision-making.

Both co-management and hybrid governance reflect features of community empowerment, aligning with the aims of Glasgow's Open Space Strategy 2020 to achieve greater public participation within the city's urban parks. On account of time constraints not all park management strategies employed throughout the city could be examined, however, the research achieved its primary objective of investigating a variety of alternative management options. Analysing the specific features contributing to the success of these existing strategies allowed principles to be created, incorporating these findings, which would optimise the maintenance and management of the city's parks

3.2.2 Community Group Appetite for Greater Responsibility

For those parks already implementing an effective alternative management strategy, the natural progression involves extending the community group and anchor organisations' role to adopt greater management responsibility through mechanisms such as community asset transfer. However, when presented with the opportunity to gain ownership over park space all community group interviewees showed resistance, citing a lack of skills, funding and time as inhibiting factors. Various 'Friends of' groups and housing associations interviewed explained that the additional benefits associated with the community asset transfer of Glasgow's parks would be eclipsed by the added pressure and long-term investment required for the mechanism's success. This confirms Gilmore's (2017, p.42) suggestion that 'the public is strongly in favour of parks remaining local authorities' responsibility' as interviewees unanimously agreed that Glasgow City Council is the best steward for the management of these public assets.

Yet whilst community groups were reluctant to accept greater management responsibility over Glasgow's parks, citizens' desire to be involved in the park decision-making process was clear. Findings indicated that establishing effective collaboration and direct communication between state and non-state actors was the most valuable means of improving park management. However, preventing financial burden and risk from being transferred to the local community is essential. Applying this knowledge, the following principles are proposed which aim to empower the community, enhance Glasgow's park partnerships and protect the future of these greenspaces.



4.0 The Proposed Principles

The diversity of Glasgow’s parks presents challenges in establishing a set of principles directly transferrable to each greenspace. Flexibility is vital with the proposed principles intended as guidance to be adapted to the specific park needs. In this way, all parks should be able to derive individualised benefits from the principles. Financial constraints limit the ability to implement the full complement of principles and therefore a degree of initiative and collaboration between state and non-state partners is essential. The following principles are proposed under themes of collaboration, communication and education, encouraging democratic decision-making and partnership to empower citizens and community groups to inspire change and positively shape Glasgow’s greenspaces. It is expected that by adhering to these principles Glasgow’s parks will be protected and enhanced, a fairer society built and greenspace inequality reduced throughout the city.

Collaboration

- Principle 1: Improve the ‘Friends of’ Glasgow’s Parks Forum
 - o Organise monthly meetings, hosted by GCC’s Parks Department’s Community Engagement Team and invite all members to participate to improve democratic decision-making
 - o Encourage participants to communicate their views on how groupwork can be improved and work together to devise creative solutions to address any issues
 - o Provide a mentoring framework to support and connect new and established ‘Friends of’ groups.
- Principle 2: Create an online platform to promote Glasgow’s parks network. The platform should:
 - o Be accessible to all community group members and non-members, creating a network which inspires a sense of belonging amongst citizens
 - o Inform visitors about upcoming activities and events across various parks
 - o Raise awareness of opportunities for volunteering in the city’s greenspaces
 - o Promote knowledge-share between various ‘Friends of’ groups
 - o Encourage participation of new members in established ‘Friends of’ groups and inspire new volunteering opportunities through the online support network.
- Principle 3: Seek non-traditional anchor organisations such as schools and further education institutions and facilitate their involvement in local greenspaces
 - o Promote partnerships and park-based projects throughout the school curriculum to increase opportunities for children’s engagement in greenspace and pupils’ influence over decision-making
 - o Offer lease arrangements for initiatives such as the ‘International Green Academy’ (2021) to implement Glasgow City Council’s Food Growing Strategy (2020) and increase learning opportunities for young people
 - o Incentivise schools’ engagement with park space through promotion of Keep Scotland Beautiful’s ‘Eco-Schools Award’ with the potential for recognition within Glasgow City Council’s ParkLife magazine.

Communication

- Principle 4: train an existing staff member as a Liaison Officer to establish a direct channel of communication between Glasgow City Council and each 'Friends of' group
 - Liaison Officer to engage with each 'Friends of' group on a monthly basis to discuss developments, ideas and issues faced, and offer solutions
 - Distribute Liaison Officer's contact details to each 'Friends of' group to facilitate two-way communication for any operational issues
 - Liaison Officer to provide practical advice on such matters as grant funding applications (e.g. the National Lottery Heritage Fund) and insurance, both issues which community groups note as obstacles.
- Principle 5: Empower citizens by promoting engagement in decision-making
 - Use 'Friends of' group as a conduit for stakeholder involvement, discussing upcoming projects and seeking local knowledge and advice
 - Provide a specific QR code at park entrances to encourage visitors to share ideas on areas for improvement within the park.
- Principle 6: regularly update information boards at park entrances to improve citizens' awareness and knowledge of the greenspace. These boards will:
 - Provide information on upcoming events, volunteering opportunities within 'Friends of' groups and the contact details of the parks' Liaison Officer
 - Direct visitors to the online platform to share their views, discover more about the park's historic significance and provide further information on participation opportunities.

Education

- Principle 7: train 'Friends of' groups to enhance skills in park maintenance
 - Organise for 'Friends of' group members to attend Glasgow Botanical Garden's Horticulture Course, with the added benefit of incentivising volunteering participation
 - Run quarterly skills training sessions in an accessible city park location with open invitation to all 'Friends of' groups to learn new skills and network
 - Liaison Officer to update online platform with park maintenance hints, tips and information sheets, reinforcing the face-to-face training session's learning points.
- Principle 8: educate citizens on projects, plans and the parks' ability to address topical issues such as climate change
 - Discuss proposed projects with 'Friends of' groups to seek informed opinions from those involved in the park space and facilitate knowledge-share
 - Update information boards regularly to inform and educate citizens regarding upcoming park plans and their environmental benefits (e.g. Glasgow City Council's Pollinator Plan, 2017) directing visitors online for additional resources
 - Use online platform to provide more detailed information on each park's individual plans and facilitate discussion between members and non-members
 - Provide information on park notice boards relating to school pupils' park-based projects centred around mapping nature trails; coupling school pupil learning with general public education.

5.0 Conclusion

In summary, Glasgow's parks are a vital asset to the city. The social value of these greenspaces is clear with various health and wellbeing benefits emerging from both individual and community group participation. Physical and mental health benefits, alongside the sense of identity and belonging which citizens derive from the city's parks, proved particularly significant over the past eighteen months. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased use of these natural spaces as a place of solace during tumultuous times.

Whilst various strategies exist to manage and maintain these valued spaces, this investigation focused upon co-management and hybrid governance approaches to determine successful aspects which could be replicated elsewhere within the city. The research proved that despite community group and anchor organisations' current involvement, all participants would be reluctant to adopt greater management responsibility, preferring collaboration with the local authority over ownership of park assets. Interviewees therefore believed that Glasgow City Council remains the best steward for these assets, though areas for improvement were raised by community groups which could enhance current park partnerships.



Drawing on interview findings and document analysis a set of principles were subsequently proposed which, through themes of collaboration, communication and education, aim to empower citizens, protect nature and enhance Glasgow's parks. These principles are intended as guidance which can be adapted to individual greenspace needs and implemented in line with financial constraints. Commitment to these eight principles will promote the social value of Glasgow's parks, ensure the most effective strategies are employed to manage these public assets and reinforce the city's identity as the 'Dear Green Place'.

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