
Not just a check box

Equitable access to parks
for disabled people and
unpaid carers

An overview of evidence and
recommendations

November 2022

Your Park Bristol and Bath

**YOUR
PARK**



About

Introduction

Research has linked green space usage to a plethora of human benefits. However there are many barriers to its access.

One in eight households have no access to a private or shared garden (Office of National Statistics, 2020). Understanding of barriers was heightened by COVID-19 'lockdowns', which saw many thousands of people restricted to their homes.

Your Park Bristol & Bath, a registered charity in England and Wales no 1182217, independently commissioned this qualitative research to delve further into specific barriers to accessing parks, the impact this has on people's lives and the opportunities to improve access.

During the course of the research, it became evident that one specific community is disproportionately affected: disabled people and unpaid carers, both adult and child.

This study reveals the key barriers to park usage and makes recommendations for equitable access to green space and its benefits for this community.

Contributors

With thanks to:

- The 19 disabled people and unpaid carer research participants
- Emma Geen, Bristol Disability Equality Forum
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- Anne-Marie Holland, Bath and North East Somerset Carers Centre
- Susy Guillari, Carers Support Centre
- Ruth Nortey, Black and Green Ambassador
- Megan Belcher, Disability Equality Commissioner, Bristol City Council
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Results

Your Park Bristol and Bath's qualitative study consulted three specific communities: Disabled adults, unpaid adult carers and unpaid child carers.

"I believe we are VERY lucky in Bristol with the number of parks. When we think of green spaces however Bristol is not so great at either ensuring those parks are inclusive or providing green spaces for the disabled community."

People describe Bristol and Bath as having an abundance of parks and identified several "beautiful" parks in the locality. 30% said that being close to green space played a major factor in their decision-making process when choosing a property to live in. But for some, even if a park is nearby, there are a series of significant barriers to spending time there including the lack of suitable facilities.

The findings from the key reoccurring themes are as follows.

1. Getting to parks

Whilst parks are somewhat easier to travel to by car, it is difficult for disabled adults and unpaid carers without private transport.

Even for disabled adults and unpaid carers with private transport, access is an issue in all except the largest, well-appointed parks.

For many, it can require more complex logistics which have the potential to add considerable time and anxiety to park visits.

1.1 Public transport and walking

Without private transport disabled adults and unpaid carers describe multiple, substantial access issues resulting in long and frustrating journey times:

- Taking the bus can be very difficult if you are a wheelchair user or with someone in a wheelchair; it may involve multiple buses or pushing for long periods of time.



- Disabled adults and carers often must travel the entire length of a street in the wrong direction to use a drop curb, an issue exacerbated further when drop curbs are located where the camber in the road is too steep, or there is not one on the other side.
- Conditions around parks present further obstacles including tree roots damaging pavement surfaces and illegal parking on pavements, something which participants feel will worsen with the introduction of parking charges within parks.
- Diversions or changes in the route can substantially add to journey times. One participant describes learning the route to teach their guide dog, while another cannot access parks unless they travel with a family member who drives.

“After getting close to the park we have to go all the way around the outside of the park to find an access that she could go safely without speeding up”.

1.2 Private transport

With private transport such as a large wheelchair accessible vehicle, disabled people and carers require access to suitable disabled parking once at the destination which people cannot be certain is available or vacant.

- Participants stated that there are not enough disabled parking spaces especially in the summer months when parks are more busy.

- Disabled parking locations are not always suitable because spaces are often situated at busy main entrances with insufficient space for a disabled vans, wheelchair ramps, or are not on flat surfaces.

“It was the first time in his new powerchair. We had to come back.”

2. Within parks: Infrastructure

2.1 Gates and pathways

Access within parks is an issue for most disabled adults and carers due to uneven or slippery pathways, which are particularly challenging for wheelchair users or people with balance issues. Disabled adults, their families and carers have even been forced to abort park trips due to a lack of safe access, which can lead to significant disappointment, upset and frustration.

This study found that whilst disabled adults, their families and carers are keen to reach parks and points of natural beauty:

- Disabled access points comprising of gates and pathways are often unpaved, muddy, uneven or slippery causing them to be unsafe.
- Paths can become unsafe if the surface is disturbed by tree roots.
- How paths are designed to navigate sloping terrain is important. Smooth, level paths with slopes are considered easier to navigate than steps, the presence of which is a substantial barrier.

Many pathways are not of a sufficient width to allow wheelchair use.



“Instead of making the path a bit longer and meandery they have slopes, but they have put steps in them as well.”

The community consulted felt that even the more recently installed access routes have failed to account for wheelchair users.

This disabled adult (below) explains that a local beauty spot has two signed routes, one of which is classified as “For wheelchairs”:

- A lack of handrails exacerbates access problems.
- Events within parks can cause the ground to be disturbed preventing the space from being navigable.
- If upcoming maintenance or changes to routes in a park are not communicated, it can cause difficulties.

Open landscaped but enclosed parks allow parents and guardians to give children and young people independence without fear of them leaving unnoticed.

“I felt like I was the only person there because everybody else had gone the other way. And that felt really vulnerable. Because it’s like “The vulnerable route is this way” and it’s signposted as the vulnerable people’s route! It’s a bit mixed that. But it’s exacerbated if you are on your own.”

2.2 Play equipment

A community-led campaign and petition for a specific adult play park was submitted to Bristol City Council in 2022 but participants were unaware of local parks designed with disabled people or those with restricted movement in mind, resulting in often no equipment they can use.

80% of unpaid adult carers consulted described play equipment as a key motivation for park visits yet there is a scarcity of such facilities. Inclusive play equipment which supports life-long play is highly desirable.

This study also revealed that:

- Sand can be dangerous for visually impaired people, can cause wheelchairs to get stuck and can damage vital personal equipment.
- Sand can damage inclusive play equipment such as level access roundabouts which become jammed with sand, and are then left unrepaired for years.

“It’s really bad. They have changed the paving in front of the sandpit so it is almost the same colour as the sandpit. So in his walking frame the floor changes to being like a sand colour on the concrete so you can’t distinguish between the two. In his walking frame the feeling is different under the feet. He can’t see it.”

- 60% of disabled adults place considerable value on the presence of play equipment in parks.
- 60% of adults expressed a desire for there to be more adult appropriate equipment.
- 40% felt equipment for physical play was missing while 40% also wanted to spend time in a park playing games on tabletops or marked on the ground.
- Accessible swings are desirable for people of all ages but participants described some have been installed with no pathway leading to them.
- Unpaid carers of adults feel that there is a total absence of play equipment in the locality for older people, particularly those with learning difficulties.

- For some, the only accessible equipment is located within toddler play areas and is therefore not suitable.
- Accessing play areas designed with younger children in mind is a cause of conflict with many participants experiencing verbal harassment from other park users.

2.3 Safety

Many participants highlighted the lack of waste bins, some of which have been set alight and not replaced.

This study found that:

- Litter poses a problem not only for nature and aesthetics, but to owners of guide dogs who are unable to see what their dogs are eating.
- Broken glass increases the chance of tyre punctures in wheelchairs.
- Dog fouling poses a slip hazard and is a major concern because of its risk to health.
- 100% of disabled adult participants identifying as female said they felt safest in a park in the daytime.

“If I can do it, someone sighted can do it...!”

2.4 Cafes

Park cafes were welcomed by 60% of disabled adult participants because the ability to have a refreshment supported a longer visit.

2.5 Seating

80% of disabled adult participants said that seating is an important part of park infrastructure.



“If I am with a friend and I’m pushing [my manual wheelchair] and I need a rest, my friend just has to stand there...”

- Well maintained seating with arm rests enables people to spend long periods of time in a park.
- Seating is important for disabled people and carers, but also their friends and family who can rest or wait whilst children and young people play.

2.6 Toilets

The provision of toilets was consistently raised by 100% of participants as a substantial barrier and they spoke about the subject with both derision and bafflement.

100% of participants mentioned an absence or insufficient number of toilets in parks and no participants were aware of a local park with Changing Places toilets.

They also said that often, there are no benches to change people on either.

“It’s an absolute human right to have access to a toilet and it does stop me using spaces as much as I would, therefore I go to town because there are toilets.”

Those living within a few metres from the park tend to go home to use the toilet. But but this is not an option for most so many described complex mitigations:

“I have to make sure I change her before we leave and have to restrict her fluid intake before we go and play.”

“I take a play tent. And then I have to build the tent. To be able to change my son. Which is a bit extreme really, when there could just be a building.”



Where toilets are present, more than half of adult carer participants expressed that they did not meet their needs. Difficulties include:

- Accessible toilets that are often closed.
- Accessible toilets which are too small for purpose preventing access for the individual, their wheelchair and carer.
- Toilets which are too small for a whole family which is important for parent carers whose children may run off.

“The toilets are all closed. Going out terrifies me. I barely go out because of that. The parks that are accessible, where they have closed all the toilets, are no-go areas.”

3. Mental and physical health

100% of participants felt that spending time in green space is good for their health. This study found that:

- The benefits are felt long after people return home too with parent carers speaking of their children “coming back a different person”.

- Adult carers noted that both appetite, breathing and sleep were positively impacted.
- 60% of disabled adults spoke of the benefit they felt from walking and being physically active.
- Children benefit through park visits by increasing social skills, maintaining social connections and reducing isolation. This is especially important for children who are not always able to attend school.

We also found that:

- Parent carers are motivated to use parks as an important resource for child development. Parks provide learning opportunities that children and young people may not otherwise have access to.
- Several parents spoke of their child’s interest in the natural world and parks fuel their children’s passions to engage with nature.

But the logistics of spending time outdoors is not always beneficial:

- Disabled people and carers need to plan before spending time in parks.
- People need to have the necessary energy levels or a clear diary making spontaneous trips a struggle.



More than half of parent carers spoke of visits to the parks eliciting negative emotions such as extreme anxiety in both them and the person for whom they provide care.

“I think the individuals I am with can also feel stress or anxiety as they are picking that up off me and the other parents in the park.”

For some parent carers, visiting parks evokes feelings of guilt because the challenge of balancing their whole family’s needs when planning visits results in them needing to leave other children at home; the lack of facilities prevents them from being able to protect their children’s dignity; or needing to leave the park because physical or social barriers may upset children and young people.

“I feel sad thinking about when we all enjoyed going together as a family.”

20% of parent carers spoke of experiencing sorrow in relation to visiting parks as it reminded them of the future that was planned for their family.

4. Dogs

“He got absolutely terrified too many times. And he would then refuse to go that way. If I ask him if we should go that way he says no. He refuses to go that way.”

For most the poor hygiene practice of dog owners is a significant issue that evokes fear, disgust and renders some spaces as unpleasant as we touched upon earlier in the report.

In addition, this study found:

- Most participants found dogs intimidating, felt that dog walkers dominated parks and it was normal for dogs to be let off the lead.
- Dogs jumping up is hazardous for people who are less steady on their feet.

Because of this, the possibility of dogs being within a park evokes a fear response that is so significant that it makes parks a no-go space.



5. Logistics

90% of adult unpaid carers described extensive planning and preparation when visiting a park. For some this can take hours and be logistically complex.

“I am there with a pen and paper. Who is going to be there? Who will lead the shift? How long is it going to take us to get there? How long will it take us to prepare? What time should we leave? It is not like we can open the door and just go.”

Several participants found themselves questioning “is it worth it?”, especially if they cannot spend much time at the park before the absence of facilities or the stress of managing multiple factors means they are likely to be forced to come home.

“As a carer I am having to be on high alert, this is exhausting and makes me wonder if I should have just stayed at the home of the person I am with.”

A lack of information about facilities and the extent to which they are inclusive, alongside the complex logistics of arranging park visits mean many people frequent only the parks that they are familiar with. They can then manage expectations and know that their needs - and the needs of their loved ones - will either be met or they can prepare appropriately.

Recommendations

A central finding of this research project is that ongoing consultation and collaboration with people who had lived experience is necessary to ensure outcomes meet community identified need. This is in line with the Nothing About Us, Without Us messaging from the Disability Movement.

The recommendations provided are a combination of interventions identified by participants and the researcher during the data gathering and analysis process.

Due to the complexity of the barriers and diversity of individual experiences, the list is not exhaustive. Therefore, this is a dynamic, collaborative system which requires constant review.

This presents a substantial opportunity to build upon relationships and work with the consulted communities to increase park access and make positive change.

1 Organisations must collaborate

- Participants expressed that current accessibility regulations do not meet the diversity of abilities within the population.
- Collaboration will increase visibility of the issues, placing it both on the national and local political agendas

2 Organisations should implement the Equality Framework for Local Government

- Recommended modules:
 - Understanding and working with communities
 - Leadership, Partnership and organisational commitment
 - Responsive services and customer care
 - Diverse and engaged workforce.

3 Organisations must co-develop projects with communities

- Participants across all three strands of the consultation identified a wealth of smaller scale interventions.
- Some interventions are deliverable on an organisational level whilst others may be achievable only with the collaboration of the local authorities.

4 Organisations should hold more accessible and inclusive community consultations

- The absence of provision for inclusion is not borne out of malicious intent, but is likely due to a substantial lack of awareness because the people who experience the problems have not been consulted.
- People should be made aware of accessible events and consultations through a wide range of mediums.
- Participants indicated that they were most likely to become notice activities on their social network but participants recommend diversifying the channels.
- Suggestions include but are not limited to Nextdoor, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.

5 Websites should be updated and regularly reviewed

- The absence of accurate information makes park visits impossible for some because people need to be able to trust the information that is available.
- A common, specific issue that people encountered was information available on council websites not being current.
- Websites reference the presence of accessible toilets with many closed, inadequate or inaccessible.

6 Toilet facilities must be improved

- Upgrading all toilet facilities to meet the Changing Places standard should be a priority goal over the next five years.
- Until this work is completed, websites and listings should be immediately updated featuring accurate facilities (including benches which can be used for changing). This will help people plan their visits, increase visitation rates and access to parks' benefits.

7 User-led parks accessibility audits should be commissioned

- Audits by people with lived experience will identify more accurate barriers.
- Suggestions include but are not limited to:
 - wider paths
 - containing sand to clearly designated areas
 - clearly highlighting hazards such as steps
 - resurfacing paths broken-up by roots
 - installing handrails
 - clearing vegetation that narrows paths, makes them slippery, uneven, or hides hazards.

8 Truly inclusive recreation should be introduced

- To be truly inclusive, parks must support play across the life-course.
- Activities should support both fine and gross motor skills. Suggestions include but are not limited to:
 - Sensory gardens
 - Pet-free areas and areas where balls/toys are not likely to enter.
 - Zoning playgrounds into age-appropriate areas to reduce conflict and mitigate physical risk.
 - Increased provision of sports. More than one session per week varied locations will enable residents with complex diary management, school or work commitments to attend.
 - Increased provision of regular, non-sporting-related activities including tours, trails, art and drawing groups, planting, conservation and poetry.
- Mechanisms such as Autism Hours should be avoided due to their restrictive nature and logistical requirements.
- Supportive play sessions that reduce the burden on the carer are preferable such as, but not limited to those with:
 - a worker to ensure that mobility aids are not used by other park users.
 - a worker to prevent children from exiting the park.
- Activities and events should be free of charge to include those with limited financial resource or who can only participate briefly.
- All activities pertaining to physical access must be considered carefully and parks carefully selected to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is present.



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