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Exploring the role of
Friends of Parks Groups in
improving urban green
spaces for health.

And the potential impact
on inequalities: a multiple
case-study design.

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the author's own



Green Space and Health

- ▶ Green space exposure / proximity leads to improved health (PHE, 2020)
- ▶ Strong evidence for link to mental health / wellbeing. Improved quality of life, mental wellbeing, life-satisfaction and resilience and reduced depression (PHE, 2020).
- ▶ 2 hours a week in green space sufficient 'dose' to improve H&WB (White et al., 2019). Equivalent to being physically active / a person's socio-economic status.



Inequality

- ▶ Green space benefits are greatest for deprived groups / people living in disadvantaged areas (Rigolon et al., 2021, Lovell et al. 2018, Geary et al. 2023)
- ▶ Living in a greener area reduces mortality inequality from 1.92 to 1.43 (Mitchell and Popham, 2008)
- ▶ But deprived areas have less green space and lower quality green space (PHE, 2020; Rigolon et al., 2016; Schule et al. 2019)
- ▶ Therefore, those who most need this free-to-use health promoting resource are least likely to have it



Friends of Parks Groups

- ▶ Local people coming together to maintain and improve their local green space.
 - ▶ Often informal ‘bottom-up’ organisations. Volunteers / activists.
 - ▶ Estimated 6000 UK groups, providing £70m of labour, £50m of funds (HLF, 2016).
- ▶ **Context**
- ▶ Local authorities manage most UGS in UK, but NOT statutory obligation
 - ▶ Last decade - large budget cuts (c25%), reducing staff numbers, declining quality
- ▶ **Are Friends Groups the answer? Described as parks “greatest hope” (APSE, 2021)**



PhD Study

- ▶ Explored role of FGs in maintaining / improving green spaces
- ▶ How these voluntary groups mobilise / sustain their activity
- ▶ Identified factors for success

Inequality lens. Do FGs..

- ▶ Reduce inequality by providing extra resource and improving UGS?
- ▶ Or increase it, by drawing scarce resources to more affluent areas?

Case Study Design

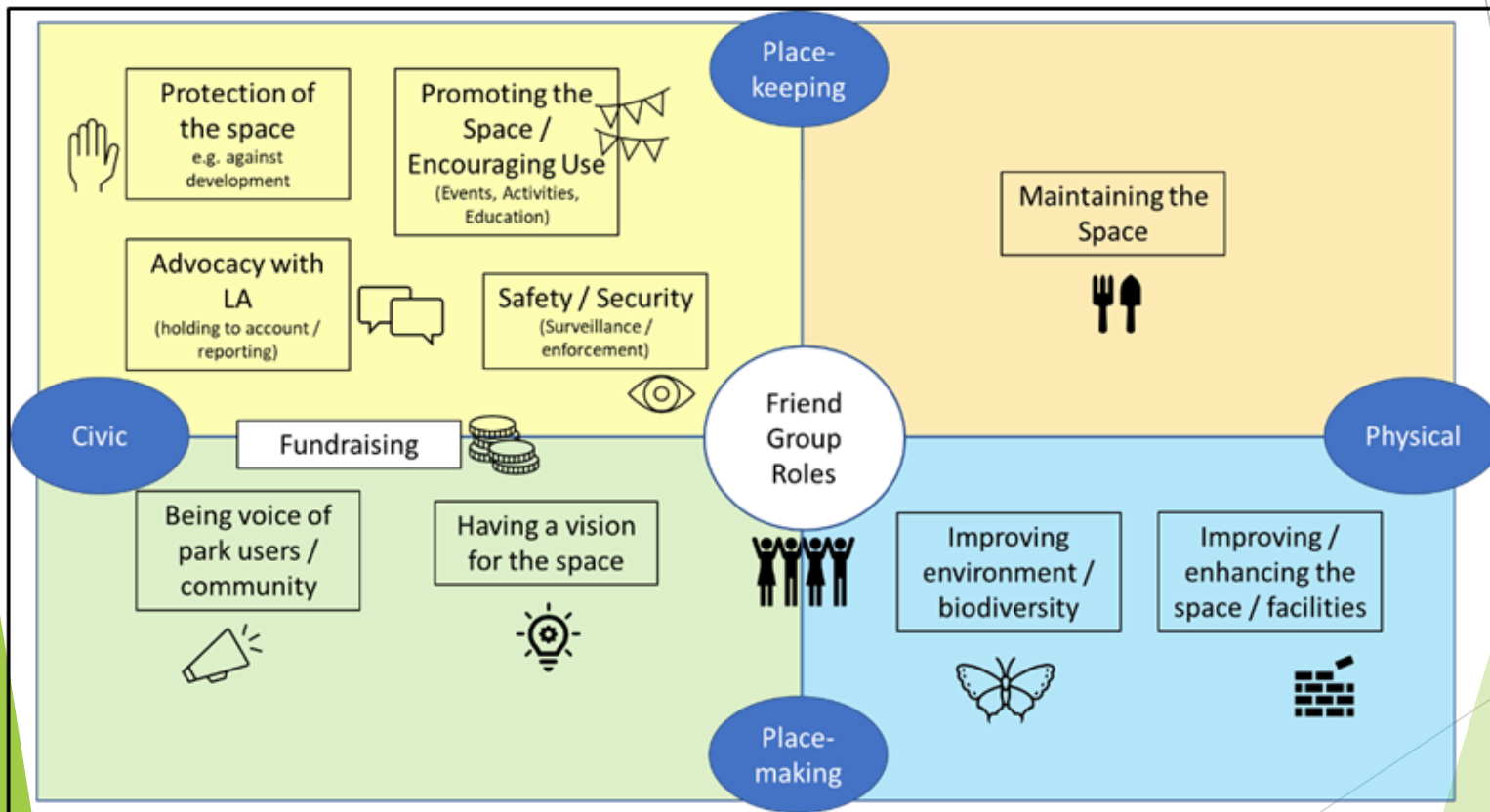
- ▶ Seven groups - all in deprived neighbourhoods
 - ▶ Five ‘established’ groups (1-2 visits). Most more than 15 years old.
 - ▶ Two ‘fledging’ groups (9-10 visits, over 3 years). At start of their journey.
 - ▶ Variety of different spaces - formal parks, informal green spaces, ‘blue’ space
- ▶ Ethnographic approach, multiple data sources:
 - ▶ Participant observation, interviews, ‘walk and talks’, documentary analysis etc.
- ▶ Plus, local authority park staff interviews





▶ Findings

Broad, diverse, ambitious activities



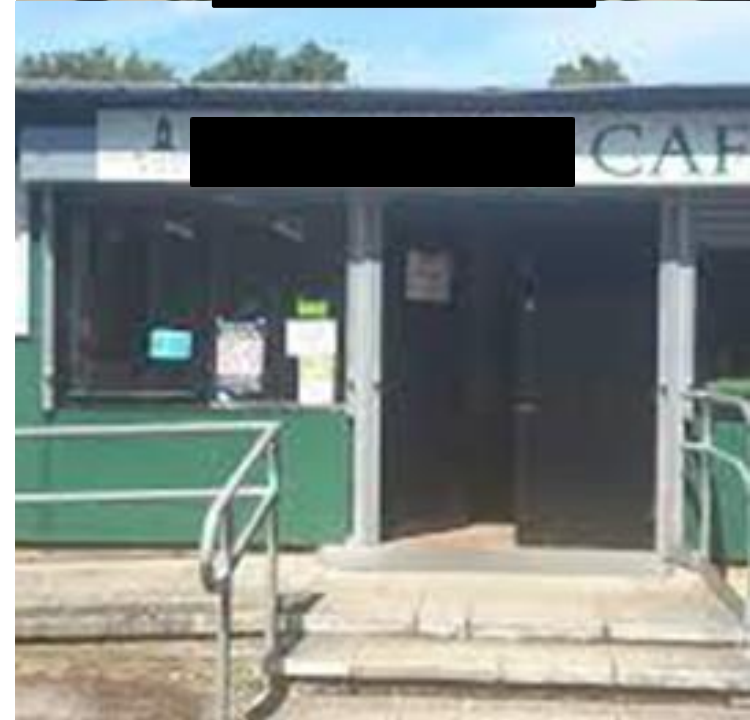


Friends of 'Norton' Park

- ▶ FG operating since 2003.
- ▶ Transformed park:
 - ▶ From being derelict, neglected, high levels of ASB *“no one of sane mind would have been proud of, let alone visit”*
 - ▶ To a safe, well-cared for, bustling park.
- ▶ Re-designed the space. Regular community events, parkrun, volunteering days, multiple new facilities
- ▶ Raised over £700k
- ▶ FG - creative, ambitious, dedicated.

Friends of 'Gaskell' Park

- ▶ Set up community hub / café
- ▶ Run activities (health walks, yoga, crafting, family)
- ▶ Conservation tasks
- ▶ Organise community events e.g. pop up farm
- ▶ Facility improvements (sport / family orientated)
- ▶ Campaigning / advocacy
- ▶ FG - largely female, linked to local church



Impact on health?

Successful FGs can transform / improve UGS:

- ▶ From under-utilized, scary, neglected spaces
- ▶ To vibrant, well-used, cared for community places, that can improve health and wellbeing
- ▶ Tackle negatives / sources of distress



Empowering local people

- ▶ Activism, sense of purpose, pride, camaraderie

BUT, success not guaranteed...

- ▶ Both fledgling groups folded during the time of the study.



Success Factors



Group Leaders

Strong, resilient Leaders - important success factor



People

Successful groups had leaders with high levels of:

- Authority (often professionals with connections)
- Confidence
- Capabilities - skilled, organised, with time, creative
- Able to 'hold their own' with LAs - effective campaigners

Less successful groups - lower levels of confidence and authority (still passionate and committed)

Power and control

- ▶ Often challenging relationships with local authority staff
- ▶ Disagreement, conflict, cultural clash
- ▶ Frustration and anger (on both sides)
- ▶ FGs can feel unappreciated, not listened to (disempowering)

“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”

- ▶ Park staff often unaware of inequality issues



Power

Power and Control (cont)

Power ‘battles’ - fighting for control of the space

“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.”

FGs want more influence. Park teams reluctant to cede control.

- ▶ ‘Strong’ groups use their connections, knowledge and status to gain power.
- ▶ Under-pressure park staff use their position / access to resources to resist sharing it.

Some examples of FGs and a LA successfully sharing power. Mutual respectful relationship. So it can work!

Implications for inequality

So, does relying on FGs reduce GS inequality, or potentially increase it?

Findings raise concerns that the current model is in danger of exacerbating inequality

Success factors identified pattern with affluence. Affluent areas more likely to have:

- ▶ High status, confident, connected individuals with time and capacity
- ▶ Groups with the capabilities to self-organise / fundraise

Deprived areas suffer more from ASB issues (challenge)

Recommendations

We DO need to embrace FGs - can bring incredible benefits for those involved and the wider community

But, HOW LAs and FGs work together needs active, critical consideration, especially of inequality implications

For it to be an empowering process, need to:

- ▶ Focus on strengthening and building the resilience of FGs in deprived areas
- ▶ Shift mindset of LAs / park staff towards more relational working
- ▶ Have greater sharing of power and control between communities and local authorities.

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Thank you

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