



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
Cultural Institute



WOW PARK

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EXPLORING HOW ART AND CULTURE CAN
HELP MAKE PUBLIC PARKS SAFER, MORE
WELCOMING SPACES FOR EVERYONE

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INTRODUCTION

Parks serve as vital green spaces for exercise and relaxation. They give us access to nature and provide walking routes away from roads. Yet, [Office for National Statistics data](#) shows one in six women feel unsafe in parks during daylight hours (three times higher than men), rising to four out of five women after dark. When women and girls feel unsafe, they are less likely to use, enjoy and benefit from parks, particularly when alone and after dark.

Building on [research](#) by the University of Leeds, we at the [Cultural Institute](#) were keen to explore what role art and cultural interventions – such as creative events, installations and design – could play in tackling this problem. The result was the WoW Park pilot project. Through this, our aim was to:

- better understand **how community art and creative design create parks that feel safer and are more welcoming, inclusive places**, with a particular focus on women and girls;
- **identify longer-term project ideas** that could help shape the plans of interested organisations, including Leeds City Council.

Our work centred on Woodhouse Moor, a 27-hectare park connecting the University of Leeds campus to the residential area of Hyde Park.

Community engagement was central to our plans. To this end, we commissioned social enterprise [Street Space](#) to consult and work with local residents and community organisations to help design and develop the project.

In late June 2024, we ran WoW Park Community Week. Over five days, Woodhouse Moor was the setting for community-driven activities and events. By collecting data and speaking to attendees, we learned more about people's responses to the project and how this impacted their views about the park.

We now want to share our findings. Though our project was small in scale, it highlights important considerations. Some of these are specific to Woodhouse Moor, whereas others offer wider lessons about the potential of art and culture to bring communities together and find creative solutions to social issues.

With this knowledge, we can collectively work towards creating parks that everyone can enjoy.

ROOTS OF THE WOW PARK



In 2022, Dr Anna Barker from the [School of Law](#) and Professor George Holmes from the [School of Earth and Environment](#) conducted a study exploring women and girls' perceptions of safety in parks. Some 117 women aged 13 – 84 from across West Yorkshire participated in interviews and focus groups, funded by the Mayor of West Yorkshire via Home Office Safer Streets Fund. Their final report [What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe?](#) informed a follow-on project in 2023, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Mayor of West Yorkshire, working with West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Keep Britain Tidy and Make Space for Girls, to co-create new guidance: [‘Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls’](#).

The guidance provides suggestions for the design and management of parks through a gendered lens so everyone can benefit. It has been recognised and adopted within and beyond the UK, including as supplementary guidance to the [Green Flag Award](#) programme. The guidance is underpinned by the following principles:

- **Eyes on the Park:** The presence of others makes women and girls feel safer.
- **Awareness:** Considered designs can make public spaces feel more secure, helping women and girls to see and be seen.
- **Inclusion:** Bringing a cross-section of women and girls into parks and designing spaces with their input helps create belonging.

This work sparked the question: how can art and cultural interventions help bring these principles to life?

BROAD IMPLICATIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

We have gathered our learning for funders, policymakers, and higher education and cultural leaders interested in the role of art and culture in creating safer parks:

- Public parks are often complex spaces. They attract a wide range of visitors, not all wanting the same things. When considering arts and culture interventions, it's important to first **invest time and resources in engaging with the local community over the long term**. This slower, collaborative approach will help ensure any creative project or event meets the needs of the people and the place.
- The **value of collaborative community design lies in the process**, not just the outputs. Bringing a wide range of people together can foster mutual understanding and shared solutions in fractured communities.
- Collaborative design requires **careful facilitation to ensure power imbalances are acknowledged and challenged**. This approach includes institutions and organisations being prepared to relinquish control and accept uncertainty about project outcomes.
- Research shows that women's voices are often silenced during community discussions. **Skilled facilitation and considered groupings** can help ensure that all voices are heard and women and girls' needs are prioritised.
- Identifying and committing to **regular events, activations or initiatives** has the potential to maintain stronger community connections, encouraging visitors to look out for each other. Increasing park use over the long term will also increase natural surveillance with more "eyes on the park".
- **Commissioning local artists, craftspeople and performers**, with a connection to the specific area, can help strengthen community pride and a sense of belonging.
- Arts and cultural interventions can help **public spaces feel vibrant, dynamic and signal they are well-maintained and cared for**. This helps create a welcoming atmosphere for everyone.

- Art and design elements cannot alone solve serious social issues. Yet, as our research highlights, they can be valuable as **part of a comprehensive urban design strategy** based on inclusivity and community empowerment that fosters care and connection for the space and each other.
- Our pilot project indicated that **arts and cultural activities may encourage a wider range of people to use public parks**. These people might not usually feel welcome or able to use a park's sports facilities, for example. Increasing footfall and supporting diverse participation, including among women, girls, families, older people and disabled people, can help foster a sense of safety and belonging for all.



SUGGESTIONS FOR WOODHOUSE MOOR

The WoW Park project was in part initiated to help inform Leeds City Council's longer-term plans for Woodhouse Moor aimed at making it a welcoming, safe space for everyone. Our project findings suggest that the council should now consider:



Seating areas that encourage socialising and activities

Social seating and group-friendly benches help transform parks into dynamic, interactive and inclusive spaces. They enhance safety by increasing social interactions, fostering a sense of community and encouraging a diverse range of visitors to actively use the park.

Civic toilet agreement

The lack of toilet facilities in Woodhouse Moor is regularly raised as a problem in terms of accessibility, and public hygiene. A long-term civic agreement with local businesses to provide toilet facilities for park users would ensure everyone can enjoy the park, including families, older people and disabled people. Increasing the time people can spend on the Moor will also enhance natural surveillance and support community events. This type of agreement will build stronger connections between residents and local businesses.



A Little Library

A Little Library will help make the park feel more welcoming and cared for and provide access to free books. It can also act as a focal point for events, gatherings and conversations, building trust and familiarity between users. By encouraging a larger cross-section of the community to visit the park, the Little Library will support inclusion and “eyes on the park”.

Initiatives to foster year-round community connections

Creating regular events, activations or initiatives will maintain the sense of community connection and pride expressed by our project participants. Facilitating these events would provide more opportunities for community bonds to develop and increase the “eyes on the park”, even over the winter months.

Targeted activities can ensure that all sections of the community feel included. For example, women and girls particularly welcomed the opportunity to take part in craft activities in the park as part of our project.

Adoption of Community Design Principles

The Collaborative Design Group created principles for the project to ensure it would: “connect and care for local people in harmony with nature on Woodhouse Moor, respecting differences and celebrating each other.” Using these principles to guide any future projects will help ensure they are locally relevant and inclusive.



Directional signposts and invitational wayfinders

Signs and wayfinders will help make the park feel more cared for and inviting. Residents deciding on the messages and positioning of these signs is a particularly effective way to provide engaging information about the park's environment, heritage and amenities. Signage can also prevent people from feeling lost. These design elements can support a sense of security and make the park more accessible to all.

Accurate crime data

Currently any crime occurring in the park is registered to a surrounding postcode, which means there is not an accurate picture of crime in Woodhouse Moor. This lack of data makes it difficult for the local community to know if the Moor's reputation for being unsafe is warranted or not, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity. Changing the way data is recorded would help the local council, police and community better understand any safety issues relating to the park.

OUR RESEARCH

The academic literature on urban parks and fear of crime underscores the need for holistic, comprehensive approaches to address safety concerns and promote inclusivity in public spaces. Strategies for engaging communities should consider gender differences, socio-environmental factors, and the diverse needs of park users to create safe and welcoming environments for everyone. By understanding and addressing the underlying drivers of fear of crime, urban planners, policymakers and other stakeholders involved in designing and re-designing local parks can collaboratively work to create more equitable and accessible urban parks that enhance the well-being of all their residents, users and visitors.

Our research review highlighted how community engagement activities are vital for understanding park usage and creating a sense of belonging and shared ownership. Yet studies also show women's voices are often silenced during community discussions. With this in mind, we commissioned Street Space to lead the project's public engagement and co-design elements. As a collaborative design social enterprise, they understood the importance of seeking out a wide variety of views, including those from marginalised groups. They also have knowledge and experience working with people to create spaces that feel safer and bring joy and social connection.

HOW DID WE DO IT?



Research

- Explored academic evidence about the perceptions of safety and the role of art, culture and lighting in parks
- Analysed crime data for Woodhouse Moor and surrounding area
- Interviewed 2 police officers

Public engagement

- Hired a local resident as an engagement lead
- 144 people directly engaged
- 450 project postcards distributed

HOW DID WE DO IT?

Collaborative design

- 12 local residents joined a co-design team
- 3 design workshops

Creative interventions

- Hosted WoW Park Community Week
- 9 new activities and installations
- 100+ people attended WoW Park Celebration Event
- 3 student ambassadors
- 6 community organisations hosted stalls
- 4 local artists performed

Evaluation of WoW Park activities

- 53 pieces of structured feedback
- 22 pieces of verbal feedback

WOODHOUSE MOOR: A SPACE WHERE PATHS AND STORIES MEET

Woodhouse Moor is the oldest public park in Leeds. Established in 1857, it was the “lungs of Leeds”, offering an escape from the smog of the Victorian city. By the 1870s, it was crisscrossed with avenues lined with saplings. Over 150 years later, those now mature trees are one of the park’s most loved features.

The Moor sits between the University of Leeds campus and the mainly residential neighbourhoods of Woodhouse and Hyde Park. Over recent decades, Hyde Park has become a popular place for student lettings. As a result, the area has a much younger population than the national average; 65% of the local population are in full-time education compared to the UK average of 20%.

Historical and ongoing tensions between the University, students and local residents are a marked feature in conversations around this project. For example, long-term residents often blame students for antisocial behaviour in the park, including making noise, littering and vandalism.

The park itself has a storied identity. Once part of a larger wild moorland, it's still home to natural springs, flowers, rabbits and squirrels. Many residents are proud of its ‘Dark Park’ designation, which helps protect its wildlife and ensures unobstructed views of the night sky. Its playground is popular with families, and the skatepark is well-used. At the same time, residents are frustrated by the lack of other facilities, especially public toilets and a cafe. The park also has a well-known reputation for antisocial behaviour and crime, especially at night, as shown by [this petition](#) citing the Moor’s darkness as raising particular safety concerns.

Data from [Street Check](#) shows little to no crime within Woodhouse Moor itself, but this may be due to how the police register any crimes to surrounding postcodes rather than in the park itself. This lack of accurate data makes it difficult for the local community to know if the Moor’s reputation for being unsafe is warranted or not, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity.

Like many public spaces, Woodhouse Moor’s story is layered and ever-changing. It is formed by people, nature, traditions and histories – and the connections between them.

"It's sometimes the only green space I see in a day. Seeing the sun rise through the trees, the flowers in springtime, the autumn leaves - they're all so beautiful."

"My favourite thing about the park is the memories that I have there and the sense of community it reminds me of."

"I've been told to avoid the park at night - that people target drunk students."

"Could we have stargazing events or even a public telescope or trail with prompts to look up?"

"I love The Moor, it has always been part of my home, but I don't feel that it is my right to go through it at night. At night it belongs to the rabbits, foxes, squirrels, rats, and other wildlife, not to me."

"It's a nice space, and I appreciate a bit of green. But doesn't feel safe in the dark and not always the cleanest or safest in terms of uneven paths, etc. Lack of public toilets and a cafe or something seems a shame, too."

* All direct quotes were recorded from survey responses, in-depth interviews and conversations at workshops.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DESIGN

Exploring perceptions of the Moor

We started by exploring people's current thoughts and feelings about the Moor. Based on the feedback from surveys, in-depth interviews and workshops, Street Space identified five key themes:

1. The green lungs of Leeds

Just as in the 19th century, Woodhouse Moor is seen as an important space for **exercise**, **relaxation** and **connection to nature** in an otherwise built-up area. Many people expressed a sense of pride in its history as a **wild moor** and some felt that its Dark Park status helps protect wildlife. However, there are concerns that the **amount** of litter makes the park feel uncared for and has a negative impact on nature.

“We all live around here and have limited access to green space - often only a yard, no garden.”

2. A park for everyone?

The **lack of toilets, a cafe and adequate benches** were all highlighted as barriers to people using the park. **Accessibility was identified as an issue for older people and those with limited mobility, wheelchairs or pushchairs.** Some people also felt excluded from areas of the park that are either gated (like the allotments) or geared towards sports.

Our survey found **people typically don't stay long in the park**, with 78% using it to get from one place to another and 62% staying for less than 30 minutes.

3. A “rich” moor with so much potential

Many individuals and community groups are **already doing great work** in the park. Some people would be keen to see areas like the bandstand have **more activities, events and concerts.** There was also a good level of interest in **exploring the park's history and heritage.**

“What about organising more gigs or events in the early evening to make it busier? So like nighttime park run ... or you could have a ceilidh club there? The bandstand is a good focal point that could be used much more.”

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DESIGN

4. Negative narratives

People reported hearing **many stories about antisocial behaviour and crime** in Woodhouse Moor. Community members also felt there was a **difference between the negative perceptions of the park and what actually happens there**. Survey results found that 62% of respondents had never or rarely witnessed antisocial behaviour or crime in the park. Whereas, 26% reported they had sometimes experienced or seen it, with 12% stating they had witnessed it more frequently. People said the **smell of drugs** and **presence of litter** fuelled the negative narratives.

5. A contested space

There is a **perceived divide between students and local long-term residents** living around the edge of the Moor. Students are often blamed for antisocial behaviour, including making noise, littering, vandalism, and attracting crime from other areas. On sunny days, the large number of students socialising in the park is seen by some locals as overwhelming. Moreover, some locals feel that the **University doesn't understand or effectively engage with the local community**.

Many students know they have a bad reputation with long-term residents and want to change that but don't know how. There is a general **desire to heal the fragmentation within the local community**, especially between students and non-students, as well as older and younger people.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DESIGN



The value of designing together

Street Space set up a Collaborative Design Group made up of 12 long-term residents and students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Over the course of three workshops, the group considered community feedback, explored different creative interventions, and drafted a vision statement and principles for delivery.

Members of the design group identified the value of working together. The shared project helped foster mutual understanding, a greater sense of belonging and civic duty. For example, many of the students in the group stated their intention to get involved in the local neighbourhood forum after the project ended.

“My first thoughts were just around lighting, but it’s been great to hear other people’s perspectives on this and take a more considerate approach.”

“Hearing different perspectives has been really good - local and student voices. Love a community project!”

“It’s been nice to get to know people - we want to get the balance right, how can we get the word out there? People are getting missed but do want a voice.”

“My daily interactions in the park have changed; I’ve become more aware.”

Shining a light on complexity

If anything underscored the importance of working closely with the local community, it was the issue of lighting.

Our early project plans considered temporary creative lighting in the park, co-designed with a cultural lighting specialist and local women as part of an annual art festival. Testing temporary creative lighting seemed a good way to support the principle that women and girls feel more secure if they can see and be seen. In the earlier research, this principle emerged as very important for some women's sense of safety.

Our research review also outlined the crucial role lighting can play in enhancing safety perceptions and extending the use of public places. For example, a study looking at the experiences of observant Muslim women in Brooklyn, New York, found that streetlights were critical to participants' sense of inclusion and engagement in public spaces (Johnson & Miles, 2016). Whereas research by Leao et al. (2018), examining data from Bogota and Nairobi, revealed that lighting, openness, visibility and access to public transport significantly influence people's feelings of safety in cities. These findings show lighting can help create accessible and inclusive public spaces, particularly for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Yet other research pointed out the limitations of relying on lighting to tackle complex social problems. A UK study by Anna Kealey (2021) states that while better lighting and CCTV can contribute to short-term solutions, they do not address the underlying issues of gender-based violence and discrimination in public spaces. Instead, Kealey argues for a more comprehensive approach based on inclusivity, diversity and community empowerment.

In Woodhouse Moor, there was also the Dark Park status to consider, as one Collaborate Design Group participant explains:

“When I first arrived, I brought up the idea of lighting to Phillippa and was surprised when she told me quite a few people might be strongly against that. I couldn't understand why since in my eyes, more visibility meant more safety. It was only through attending the sessions and engaging in conversation with others I began to realise how important the Dark Park was. Now even I wouldn't want light fixtures!

“Essentially, I learnt that taking the time to listen to others can do wonders for the outcome of given scenarios. Not to sound cliché but it was a good **reminder to be more considerate** of how others view the park and also that the first idea is usually not always the best. It takes refinement and deeper thinking to come up with something far better.”

These reflections act as a powerful reminder to us all about the value of listening carefully to a variety of opinions and being prepared to adapt plans based on feedback.

Tackling complex problems takes time and resources and potential solutions can also shift depending on changing circumstances and technologies. For example, a community-driven project in Glasgow decided to trial a more ecologically sensitive approach to lighting, thanks to the development of solar eyes, reflective waymarkers and off-grid lighting.

Creating safer public spaces can't be a case of one size fits all. This work involves the interplay of social, cultural and environmental factors that depend on the place. One way to help navigate these factors is to co-design a set of principles to guide the project delivery.



Vision Statement by the Collaborative Design Group

The intervention will connect and care for local people in harmony with nature on Woodhouse Moor, respecting differences and celebrating each other.

Principles for delivery

The Collaborative Design Group also drew up the following principles to underpin the WoW Park project while continuing to strengthen local community relationships:

- Commission hyper-local artists based in Woodhouse or Hyde Park
- Involve local young people and children in the design and making process
- Use the park to promote the project, what's happened and what's to come
- Include students by delivering work during term time
- Continue to communicate who's been involved and what we've heard
- Ensure interventions and activations are inviting and welcoming to all
- Ensure events are targeted at a mixed audience
- Create seasonal and recurring events where possible
- Ensure high-quality fabrication to reduce the risk of damage
- Ensure maintenance and de-installation plan is in place and leave no trace

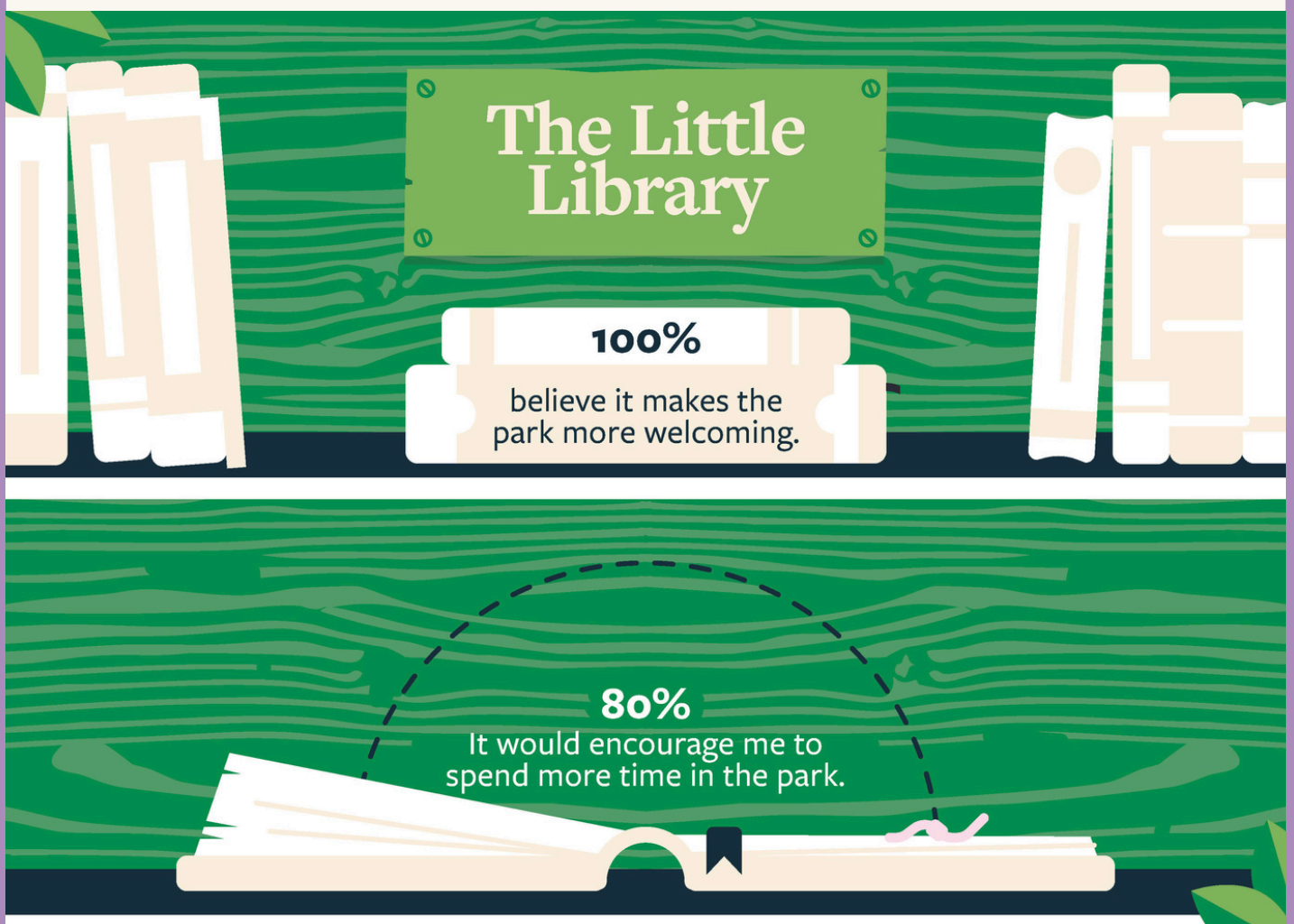
You can find more detailed information about Street Space's engagement and co- design work in the engagement report on the Cultural Institute's website.

WOW PARK CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Drawing on ideas of the Collaborative Design Group, the team developed WoW Park Community Week. Over the course of five days in June, we piloted creative interventions, capturing initial feedback through structured evaluation methods and informal conversations.

The installation of a small book exchange was designed to foster community spirit and ownership, provide free access to books, signal that the park is well cared for and increase the number and diversity of visitors.

Events also took place around the Little Library. For example, the Elder Connect Community Group hosted a picnic. There were also activities with book reading and board games for local 16-18-year-olds, where we provided additional seating.





Seating exploration

A lack of adequate seating had been identified as a barrier to some people coming to the Moor. Our intention was to supplement the current individual benches that looked out over the Moor with more social seating and group-friendly benches to create interactive and inclusive spaces. This would help enhance by increasing a sense of belonging and community and encouraging active use of the park by a diverse range of visitors.

We extended the Little Library seating area for one afternoon to explore how the public interacted with it. During the Saturday Celebration, we also installed additional wooden seating.

Feedback

Our observers noted that the additional seating was well-used by women, girls, families, students and older people. During the Saturday event, the seating acted as a meeting point, and users of different ages started chatting together.

"I'd love to see a permanent bandstand and more benches in the park + toilets!!" - Comment left on the feedback tree.



Directional signposts and invitational wayfinders

As part of the Saturday celebration, we installed two directional signposts and five invitational wayfinders in spots decided by the Collaborative Design Group. The aim was to improve navigation and make the park feel more welcoming and accessible.

The Design Group agreed on the wording of the wayfinders, which say things like: “This is a great place to watch birds” or “This is a great spot for lunch.” The signs will remain in place throughout the summer.

The evaluation team recorded that different people had remarked on how they found the signs encouraging and felt more welcomed.

Feedback

“The event made the park feel more like home. Usually I walk through the park, but it never felt so familiar as today. I like the wood sitting areas and the wood signs. Learning about heritage was really interesting.” - Comment left on the feedback tree



WOW Park Celebration Event

On Saturday 29 June, we hosted a daytime event on Woodhouse Moor. Our aim was to forge stronger community connections and a sense of belonging and pride. We also wanted to explore how this type of event might increase footfall from a cross-section of the community, which would support inclusion and increase “eyes on the park.”

Alongside performances from local musicians and poets, there were community stalls, refreshments stands, a football station, a craft zone and a young person’s chill-out zone, stocked with games and play equipment.

Responding to the call for more opportunities to engage with the Moor’s history, we commissioned guide Matt Betham to run Woodhouse Moor Hidden History Tours. Visual artist Emma Bentley Fox also created historical view masters using old photos, so visitors could compare the park “now and then”.

Throughout this project, people have highlighted the lack of toilets in the park as a problem. We arranged with Saint Augustine’s Wrangthorn Church and Hyde Park Book Club for event attendees to access their toilets on the day.

Feedback

Our evaluators recorded:

- The event attracted over 100 people, with a mix of genders, ages and ethnicities.
- Community stalls were a focus point for connection and interaction throughout the event, and many older people spent time talking to the stallholders.
- The craft zone was consistently busy. This area was particularly popular with women and families. Many women said it was relaxing and appreciated being able to focus on something creative in the park.
- Parents and children sought out the chill-out zone, using it to play chess, read books or play.
- Playing table tennis was particularly popular with men and boys.
- Young adults (18-25) were least engaged with activities and were underrepresented at the event compared to the number using the park.
- The bandstand at the centre of the park was a quieter area, although it became busier during performances. Event attendees started dancing to Irish folk music. Young women and family groups played with hula hoops and ribbons during the music performances.
- Several people interacted with the viewfinders and expressed interest and surprise in the historical photos.
- Conversations often focused on memories of the park and how it had changed, positive reflections about the annual Unity Day event, football, the lack of toilets, how the park felt safer in the summer and the importance of community.

"It's been a quiet event, not too many people, but really intimate. A really good chance to meet people and talk about the project." - Muslim Youth Heritage stallholder speaking to evaluator

"It's a great project. My friend's visiting from London so I was taking her to see Hyde Park and the uni. We saw the signs and the Little Library. It's really lovely." - Female student speaking to evaluator

"It is welcoming. It's a gentle affair with high impact." - Older male resident at listening post

Lovely conversations with new and existing friends. Great that the music is at an enjoyable volume to allow conversation." - Comment left on feedback tree

"I've lived here all my life, and this park can be scary at night in particular, and here we are on an event that drifts into the evening where everyone is together, having a good time, looking after each other." - Young male resident

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

We started this pilot project keen to learn more about the role of art and cultural interventions in creating more welcoming, safer public parks. Given the project's limited timescale and capacity, we knew this was ambitious, but we recognised the value of analysing research and scoping out longer-term project ideas that could have a lasting impact.

We acknowledge that the project took place against a backdrop of longstanding tensions between the University and the local community. It is clear that our institutional systems have been rigid and this has often caused challenges for effective collaboration. While working together on new installations and activities for the Moor has made small steps towards improving communication, we understand that substantial change requires sustained, meaningful engagement. We are committed to emphasising this need for ongoing engagement with the University's leadership.

As we have outlined in the [broader implications for decision-makers](#), creative design alone should not be seen as a quick fix for the complex problem of gender-based violence and discrimination in public spaces.

Yet, if part of a comprehensive strategy, our research and project findings suggest that art and cultural activities can support community pride, inclusion and belonging. They can also increase the active use of public parks by a greater cross-section of the public, leading to more natural surveillance and safety. On this basis, we will report back to Leeds City Council about our [specific suggestions for next steps](#) in Woodhouse Moor.

As this project has shown, collaborative, creative work can take time and involve difficult conversations. But, by providing opportunities to develop connections, build empathy and find common ground, it can also empower communities to bring about positive change.

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