



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS  
Cultural Institute



# WOW PARK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
AUGUST 2024

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 conducted a study exploring women and girls' perceptions of safety in parks. Their final report [What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe?](#) informed new guidance: ['Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls'](#).

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:



## **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”.

## **Civic toilet agreement**

The lack of toilet facilities in Woodhouse Moor is regularly raised as a problem in terms of accessibility, safety 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.

## **Directional signposts and invitational wayfinders**

Signs and wayfinders will help make the park feel more cared for and inviting. Local 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.



### **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.

### **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 (see p20 of full report).





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You can dig into the research and project findings that underpin these recommendations by reading the full report.

## **Licensing and citation information**

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