Birmingham City Council

EARTH STORIES SUMMARY REPORT: MARCH 2022

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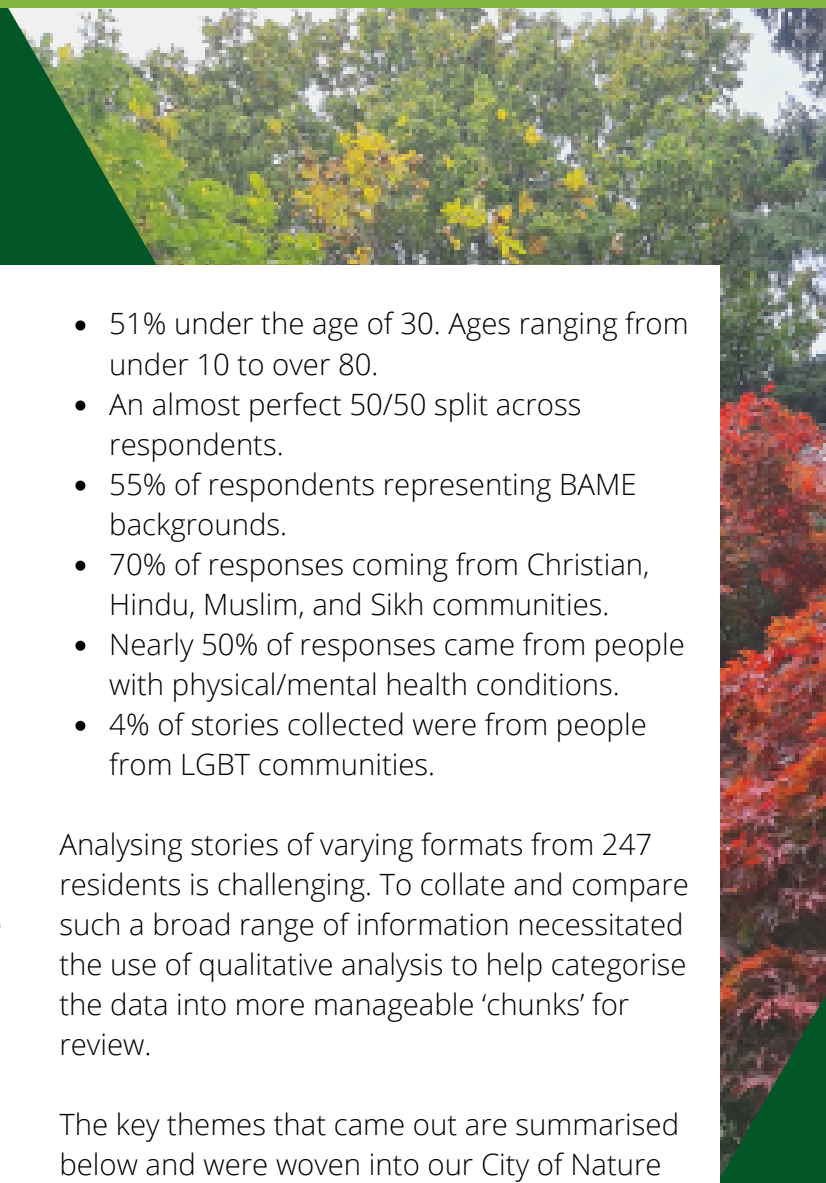
Made possible with Heritage Fund

NATURALLY BIRMINGHAM: FUTURE PARKS ACCELERATOR

ABSTRACT



As part of the development of a 25-year City of Nature Plan, it was essential we found a way to capture the views of local and diverse community groups regarding their green spaces. We also wanted to go beyond asking the usual suspects or asking people to complete a survey – so we took a different approach.

Our parks are more than just patches of greenery. They are places where so many of our memories were made, and where so many more will be formed in the future. From childhood to adulthood, green spaces are where we connect with both nature and each other, shaping memories that last a lifetime. We wanted to hear these Earth Stories from our residents, and collected them as below:

- Many of our stories were submitted to us directly via email in response to our call to action, most of these took the form of a short story/ recollection typed out by a resident, but others took the form of photographs/drawings, testimonials, videos, and blog posts.
- Residents could submit their Earth Story via an online questionnaire to input their demographic data, followed by their Earth Story in a free form text box. There was also the option to submit the story as an image, video, or PDF file via this option.
- To aid us in reaching underrepresented groups, we offered small grants via the local Council grants process to specialist community organisations who were better equipped to engage with such residents.

Our 247 stories came from people with a wide range of backgrounds – not typical of usual green space respondents:

- 51% under the age of 30. Ages ranging from under 10 to over 80.
- An almost perfect 50/50 split across respondents.
- 55% of respondents representing BAME backgrounds.
- 70% of responses coming from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities.
- Nearly 50% of responses came from people with physical/mental health conditions.
- 4% of stories collected were from people from LGBT communities.

Analysing stories of varying formats from 247 residents is challenging. To collate and compare such a broad range of information necessitated the use of qualitative analysis to help categorise the data into more manageable 'chunks' for review.

The key themes that came out are summarised below and were woven into our City of Nature Plan:

- **Environmental value**: The role of our parks in enhancing biodiversity and offsetting the impacts of Climate Change
- **Community value**: The vital role our green spaces play as community and social hubs.
- **Future aspirations**: The clear message from our residents that our parks and green spaces must be protected and enhanced for generations to come.
- **Covid-19 impacts**: The newfound appreciation of the value of our green spaces throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Health & wellbeing**: The benefits of green spaces to physical and mental health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Naturally Birmingham Team would like to thank all participants who shared their fantastic stories, experiences, and memories with us; without you, this work would not be possible. We would also like to thank all the community groups who worked with us to collect these wonderful stories – Black Arts Forum, Stechford Village Neighbourhood Forum, Welsh House Farm Green Grafters, The Friends of Georges' Park, Footsteps, Northfield Arts Forum, Queen Alexandra College, Over 50s Go Getters, Stirchley Snowflakes Festival, Norton Hall and Brownfield Road Allotment Garden Association as well as all those who have shared their earth stories via our blog page: https://naturallybirmingham.org/blog/.

We would also like to thank our funders, Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Trust, as well as Karen Cheney, Ruby Dahya and Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council (BVSC) too for their help.

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INTRODUCTION

The Naturally Birmingham Programme is one of seven UK cities to be part of the national Future Parks Accelerator funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and National Trust. Birmingham City Council received funding in 2019 to find ways to embed the value of nature across the whole organisation and within local communities. As part of this, it was essential we found a way to capture the views of local and diverse community groups regarding their green spaces.

Our parks are more than just patches of greenery. They are places where so many of our memories were made, and where so many more will be formed in the future. From childhood to adulthood, green spaces are where we connect with both nature and each other, shaping memories that last a lifetime.

We wanted to hear these stories from our residents. Each of Birmingham's 600-plus parks has a memory attached to it and knowing how these green spaces make our residents feel - good or bad, is essential to the creation of our City of Nature Delivery Plan. Our 'Earth Stories' project collected 247 memories, experiences, and thoughts for the future from our residents – giving us a fantastic insight into how our parks are used, and how they have impacted on our residents' lives. With the aid of a range of community partners we were also able to gather stories from a range of oft-underrepresented groups to help highlight the barriers that many sections of our population face.

The fantastic variety of experiences that were shared with us highlighted just how different not only our individual parks are, but how people interact with these spaces. We received stories that covered a huge range of topics, from beloved childhood memories of a first cricket game, to finding a new appreciation of nature during daily lockdown walks. It was clear throughout the course of this project that the residents of Birmingham hold their parks close to their hearts, and that it is the duty of the Council to protect and enhance them for generations to come.

Throughout the course of the Naturally Birmingham project, we have experienced time and time again the importance of stories (and storytelling) in championing green spaces and nature. We all know the benefits of spending time outdoors, walking, or connecting with nature, but relating this to people's lived experiences and memories is so much more powerful than listing facts and statistics that we often just block out day by day. The Earth Stories project has been vital in our work to put parks at the forefront of several related, but often unconnected agendas: Children's Education and Care, Health and Wellbeing, Employment and Skills, Governance, and Finance – sometimes all it takes is a story. We also wanted to use an approach that would be inclusive and accessible enabling the voices of our city's diverse communities to be heard. This has allowed us to collect stories from a range of participants and audiences that do not usually participate through more traditional forms of consultation.

People need parks and parks need people.

METHODOLOGY

RATIONALE

Traditionally when gathering data around use of green spaces the focus has been on quantitative data gathering, how many people visit parks, how many times a week for how long. Or very directed data gathering, "Why do you visit the park?" and answers are from a dropdown list. Using story telling as a method of collecting data allows collection to be focussed on qualitative data instead and gives control of the sharing of data completely to the person sharing it.

Why stories?

Stories are fascinating and they are one of the best ways to capture our imagination. From childhood to adulthood, people are attracted to stories and the lessons they teach, the journeys made, and the knowledge gained. They allow us to feel what something was like and to empathise with the storyteller.

Stories celebrate the fact that people are social creatures with language as their means of communication. So, essentially, storytelling is the oldest form of knowledge transfer. People have been telling stories ever since the spoken language evolved, and possibly even before through sign language and drawings - with the Chauvet cave in France being the oldest representation of stories found thus far dating back to approximately 36,000 years ago.

Initially, stories functioned to tell of danger, set examples, or just relate events, but they also lead to attempts to explain the seemingly unexplainable through fairy tales and fiction.

Stories providing qualitative data

Qualitative data is information which comes from observation, description or other non-numerical sources. Stories providing words are a common form of qualitative data, which, unlike quantitative data can't be counted. The data requested from participants comprises people's opinions and views expressed in their own words. The qualitative data collected also includes what people told collectors in interviews or focus groups, videos or photographs, and through other means including poems, drawings and photographs.

Every item of qualitative data will be unique, so we weren't able to compare them to each other directly like the quantitative data from surveys. But we still analysed sets of statements and narratives together to find themes and patterns to gain a deeper understanding of how green spaces may be affecting people.

METHODOLOGY

COLLECTION

We collected our 'Earth Stories' via a series of methods. We announced our plans for the project in early 2021 and began an open call for people to submit their experiences. All submissions were collected in accordance with data privacy laws and anonymity was preserved where required/desired.

Direct Submissions

Many of our stories were submitted to us directly via email in response to our call to action, most of these took the form of a short story/ recollection typed out by a resident, but others took the form of photographs/drawings, testimonials, videos, and blog posts.

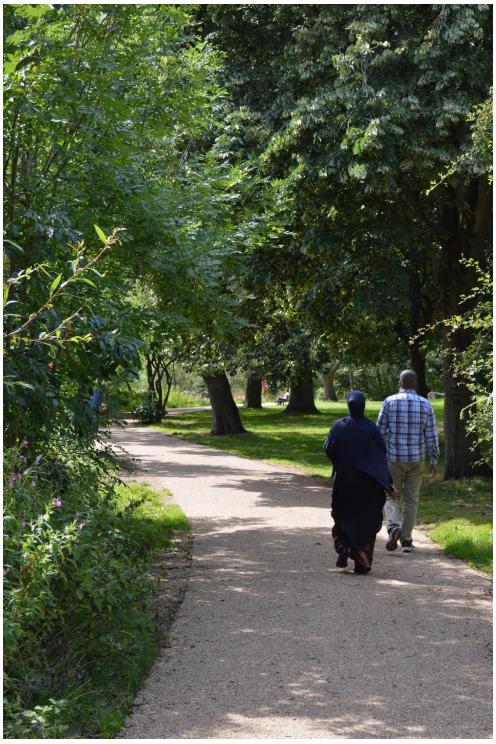
Online Survey

We also provided the option for residents to submit their Earth Story via an online questionnaire – this method allowed respondents to input their demographic data, followed by their Earth Story in a free form text box. There was also the option to submit the story as an image, video, or PDF file via this option.

Targeted collection alongside community groups

A key outcome for this work was to gain insights from communities that are often underrepresented in matters relating to green spaces and the natural environment. To aid us in reaching these groups, we offered small grants via the local Council grants process to specialist community organisations who were better equipped to engage with such residents, which included:

- Particular ethnic groups (from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Arab, Chinese, Eastern European (including Polish community and Roma Gypsy communities), Black African – Caribbean descent)
- The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community
- Young people (under the age of 16)
- People with disabilities, as per the social model of disability
- Faith groups (Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist)



We issued these organisations with a small grant to aid in the collection process, the stories were then returned to us via the methods above.

METHODOLOGY

ANALYSIS

Collecting stories of varying formats from almost 250 residents is not what you might call a 'usual' dataset. To collate and compare such a large range of information necessitated the use of qualitative analysis to help categorise the data into more manageable 'chunks' for review.

Process

Qualitative, or thematic analysis is an iterative process that is extensively used by researchers when dealing with qualitative (i.e. non-numeric) data. A series of collate-review-reflect phases are used to gradually familiarise and categorise large, subjective datasets into smaller 'themes' to allow for trends to be identified.

Preparation

Once the collection phase of the project ended, we organised and prepared the data for analysis – sorting direct submissions and extracting data from surveys. Demographic information was separated and analysed separately. We also performed a brief review of each story to check for any duplicates and to allow ourselves an initial familiarisation with the data.

Transcription

As several of our submissions came in photo or video format, the information had to be transcribed into a standard format. In most cases this involved inputting the text or speech into a standard word processing format to allow for easier review.

Familiarisation

The next stage of the process involved deeper familiarisation with the data. This involved a closer analysis of each story, or a 'sweeping review' of all the submissions we had received. The aim of this stage was to observe and make notes of the initial themes and categories that were emerging in the data, as well as identify any gaps or limitations that were present. This was the first step in developing a coding structure that would enable us to analyse the data in full.

Forming a coding structure

After familiarising ourselves with the data, we were able to start to form a coding structure. This involved a series of cycles aimed at reviewing the submissions and identifying key themes and categories that started to emerge. This started with assigning 'codes' (identifiers) to important statements or experiences in each story, and these codes later grew into 'categories', and then 'themes' - grouping similar sets of identifiers over several review cycles, increasing levels of inference and relevance with time. These cycles were continued until a final set of themes and codes were agreed; this allowed us to view the data at varying levels of detail by tallying the occurrence of certain codes, categories or themes.

METHODOLOGY

QA Coding

An abridged version of our coding structure can be seen below:

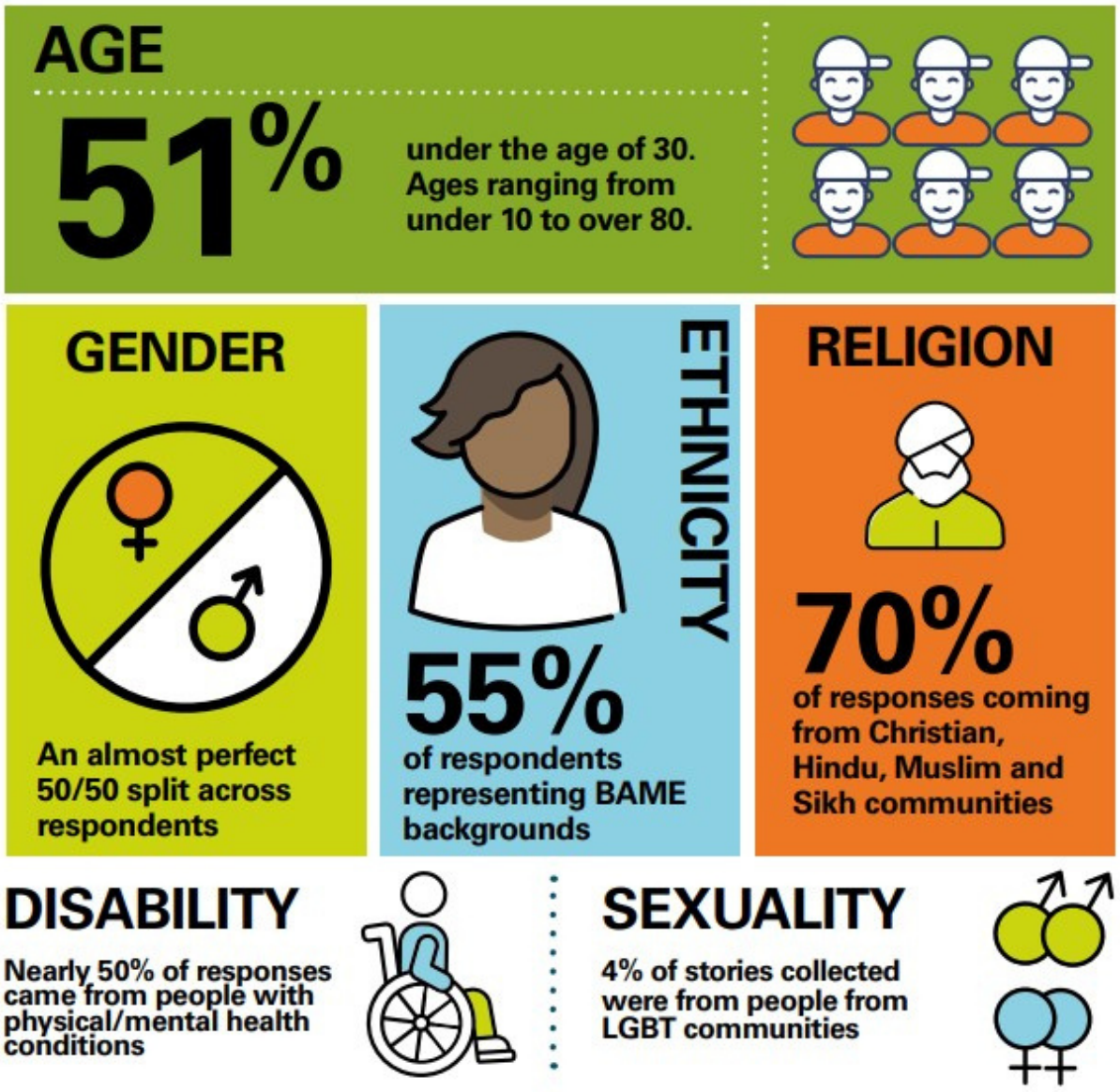
Theme	Category (Subsection)
Health & Wellbeing	Physical Wellbeing/Physical activity Mental health/ headspace/ calm Nature connectedness
Social Cohesion & Community Integration	Socialising / meeting friends & neighbours Joining in with events/ activities Volunteer participation
Memories and Experiences	Childhood memories Adulthood memories New experiences/ New activities
Economic Benefits	Improves local area/ land value New skills/ employment
Environmental Benefits	Living Environment Physical Environment
Future Aspirations	Preserve and improve green spaces Reducing physical barriers Reducing socio economic barriers
Covid-19	General mention of pandemic Positive impact due to Covid-19 Negative impact due to Covid-19

FINDINGS

DATA

Demographic Data

Ensuring we spoke to as many people from varied backgrounds as possible was really important to us in this project. All too often the voices that we need to hear the most are not given the chance to express their views and experiences, and this is something we wanted to change when undertaking our Earth Stories project. To aid us in this, we worked alongside community organisations in Birmingham to specifically target traditionally underrepresented groups in green space sectors which really helped us hear from a broad range of individuals. A summary of the demographics of those who shared their stories with us can be found below:



FINDINGS

In-depth breakdown:

Note – submitting demographic information was optional, and a number of participants chose to withhold this information.

Age Range	%
0-9	0.7
10-19	23.1
20-29	28.6
30-39	11.6
40-49	8.2
50-59	10.9
60-69	12.9
70-79	3.4
80+	0.7

Responses: 147

Gender	%
Female	47.7
Male	52.3

Responses: 149

Sexual orientation	%
Bisexual	1.5
Gay/Lesbian	0.8
Heterosexual / Straight	86.4
Other	1.5
Prefer not to say	9.8

Responses: 132

Ethnicity	%
Asian or Asian British	32.4
Black or Black British	20.4
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	3.5
White: British or non-British	40.1
Prefer not to say	3.5

Responses: 142

Religion	%
Christian (all denominations)	38.1
Hindu	1.4
Muslim	29.5
No religion/Agnostic	20.9
Sikh	1.4
Other	2.9
Prefer not to say	5.8

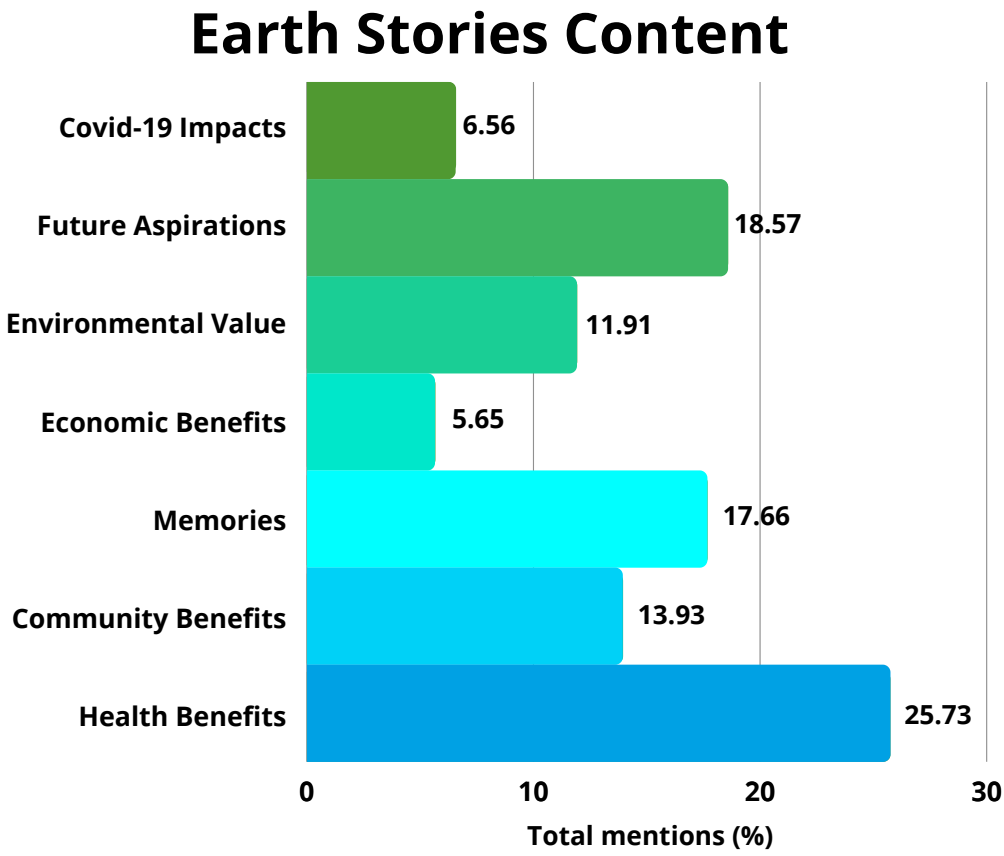
Responses: 139

Physical and/or mental health conditions	%
No	49.6
Yes	48.2
Prefer not to say	2.2

Responses: 139

FINDINGS

THEMES



Covid-19 Impacts

Despite the challenges the Covid-19 pandemic has brought, our analysis found that many residents shared that they discovered a newfound appreciation for nature as a result of the pandemic, re-connecting with green spaces locally and even wider afield. Many of the stories have mentioned that our parks have been a lifeline, providing a means of escape from the indoors, and acting as a way to maintain social relationships away from the computer screen. A smaller but not insignificant number however expressed a longing for a return to normality, where running clubs, events, volunteering groups and gatherings are allowed once more in our green spaces. It is clear from our analysis that the pandemic has had a strong, lasting impact on the way we view our parks and green spaces, with many using this challenging time as a way to reconnect with nature in a way that may have never been possible pre-pandemic.

FINDINGS

Future Aspirations

The message from residents is clear – an overwhelming majority expressed a desire for our parks to be preserved and improved long into the future. The pandemic has not only strengthened people's love for parks and green spaces but also allowed new visitors to spend time outside and connect with nature. Many people shared their concerns that despite all our action to tackle Climate Change, our parks and open spaces still seem increasingly at risk from development or disrepair. Many told us of the need for our parks to become more accessible, not just physically, but also in terms of reducing barriers to those from less well represented socio-economic backgrounds – whether through fostering an increased confidence to visit green spaces, or challenging the ingrained image of who traditionally uses parks. Parks are for everyone, and our approach in the future should reflect this.

Environmental Value

Many stories displayed a passion for preserving our green spaces and their benefits to both the living and physical environment, from the surprising presence of common lizards and slow worms in Dawberry Fields, to the vital flood management benefits of the green areas surrounding the River Rea. There was a consensus that we should be doing as much as possible to address the current biodiversity crisis that the world is facing, and that Birmingham, as a City of Nature, should be at the forefront of addressing this in the UK. The stories also highlighted the impact of plant life on air quality and carbon emissions, though they recognised that tree planting alone is not the solution to Climate Change. Many also expressed a joy at their time spent in our parks simply experiencing nature - watching squirrels climb trees, listening to the birds sing, the excitement of seeing a fish breach the water. This connection to nature is vital for the health and wellbeing of our residents, yet this would not be possible without the wealth of biodiversity found in our green spaces.

Economic Benefits

A small number of stories highlighted the economic benefits of green spaces in Birmingham. Much of this highlighted the perhaps surprising wealth of jobs and skills opportunities linked to parks and green spaces, and the range of careers that tie-in to the environment – with many of our younger residents expressing how excited they were to work with animals and the environment in the future. Many stories also highlighted the link between access to parks/nature and economic development, and how closely linked the two outcomes are in Birmingham, with many poorer areas having much lower access to good quality green spaces. Parks are something that everyone should have access too, and addressing these inequalities is key to our work as a City of Nature.

FINDINGS

Memories

There is an incredible range of memories people have in our green spaces. Many of these link to childhood – taking a trip down to the lake to see the tadpoles spawning, recalling being in awe at the size of the unending span of trees in a forest, or spending countless hours just exploring. There were so many fantastic personal stories shared with us, and it really proved the value in protecting these spaces to ensure that future generations can experience all that we have for themselves. Many also recalled more recent memories in adulthood; from the first time they took their child to a park, moving to a new area and making friends in outdoor painting sessions, to getting involved with tree planting and habitat restoration. Our analysis really helped show how many happy, long lasting memories are made in our parks – not just in childhood, but all the way into adulthood and old age. Nature brings us all together, no matter your age or background.

Community Benefits

A significant proportion of stories focused on the community aspect of green spaces – for many, meeting in our parks was the only way to interact with friends and family during lockdowns; others fondly recollect festivals, events and gatherings that took place in more normal times. What really shone through in the stories submitted to us was the passion people had for our parks, through volunteering time and effort to help maintain and sustain them as part of our many wonderful Friends of Parks groups. Our analysis really helped show that parks truly act as the centre of a community, somewhere for us to gather and connect as a society in times where we are increasingly feeling more isolated from each other. It is clear that parks are not just a 'destination', they are an intrinsic part of our community.

Health Benefits

By far the most common theme in the stories we analysed was the impact of parks on our health and wellbeing. A majority of stories shared how essential green spaces were to their physical health, providing a pleasant space to get active alone or in groups. We heard stories of people discovering outdoor yoga, dance classes, trying new sports, lunchtime walks, and running clubs – things many only do because our parks. Many others also focussed on the benefits to mental health, using their time in nature as a way to escape the pressures of life and really focus on the things that matter. There is a wealth of literature on the benefits of green spaces and nature on our health and our analysis only adds to the support of these findings. Green spaces provide unquantifiable benefits to our mental and physical health, and their benefits are felt across our entire population. It is clear that these spaces take a key role in improving the health of our residents, and will be vital in the race to tackle obesity and ill-health as a result of inactivity, as well as the ongoing mental health crisis that is being felt nationally.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

DISCUSSION

Overview

The data we processed provided a fantastic insight into the way our residents think about and interact with our green spaces, and how this has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. One thing that really shone through during our analysis was the amount of passion people had for our parks – not just the larger 'signature' parks, but the smaller spaces, the grass verges, the meadows, and the avenue trees too.

What became increasingly apparent throughout our analysis was the role of green spaces and nature beyond the physicality of the space itself – parks are spaces for people to connect, socially and with nature. They are spaces for people to de-stress, to escape from the ruminations of life, and in many cases they are the cornerstone of the community, somewhere for people of all ages and backgrounds to come together and experience the natural world. Our analysis really helped show that which we perhaps all knew already – parks and green spaces are not just something to 'maintain', they are not simply something that is nice to have, they are an essential, intrinsic part of our lives, and something that residents truly value.

Furthermore, in times where Climate Change is high on the global agenda, and governments race to mitigate the effects of a warming world – parks and green spaces form a vital resource in our fight against these adverse impacts. Our analysis showed that our residents share these concerns, and understand the vital role of preserving and enhancing these spaces in the aid of reducing our emissions and enhancing biodiversity in our city. Our natural capital not only aids in the reduction of our impact on the planet, it also aids us in mitigating some of the impacts of a changing climate. The more we protect nature, the more it protects us.

Limitations of the work

There were several challenges we faced while undertaking this work. Collecting and processing such a large, diverse range of stories was a big task in itself, however the submissions came in a large range of formats and styles – as well as text submissions, we received videos, voice recordings, photos, and drawings. While this approach allowed us to be much more flexible in receiving submissions and made it as easy as possible for those sending us their stories, it added a large burden of work in making sure these were all transcribed, organised and processed correctly. While specialist qualitative analysis software exists for work of this nature, it was not considered for this project – however, should similar work be undertaken in the future with a larger dataset, this would vastly reduce the amount of time required for analysis.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the likelihood of any bias in our analysis, we took a number of precautionary steps. All coding categories were agreed upon by committee, and several 'test' stories were analysed at the same time by the group to calibrate the accuracy of our analysis. Names and demographic information were also kept separate from the stories themselves where possible to ensure any stories were viewed through a neutral lens. Despite this, there is always the possibility of some element of bias when undertaking this sort of research, as the classification of qualitative data differs from person to person.

We also encountered difficulty in our grants process – we were keen to ensure that the community groups we worked with were rewarded for their help, yet in some cases this was also a barrier to them working with us. In many cases, the scale of paperwork required to apply for the small grants meant that some providers chose to not undertake the work, meaning we lost out on some potentially crucial voices due to bureaucratic processes. At the time of the project's inception, the grants were seen as an extra incentive for the work, but for future projects of this nature, the grant process itself would need to be simplified and made more accessible – especially to smaller voluntary providers that may not have the time to work through masses of process to access such grants.

TIPS FOR FUTURE WORK

- Don't be too rigid with initial coding and analysis framework, spend time reading the responses before and familiarise yourself with the content before leaping into the analysis.
- Qualitative analysis is an iterative process so use this to refine the coding and themes in each review.
- Recruit a small team to assist with review and analysis and talk through the findings with others to refine the process and check for any potential bias
- Build in appropriate time for organisation and analysis, it will always take longer than you expect
- Use a range of media, early video examples help inspire and encourage others to participate
- Be flexible and open and allow participants to talk about what is important to them
- Working with community networks and local representatives help extend the reach of the project / research and the range of participants