

Report to: Place, Regeneration and Housing Committee

Date: 5 January 2023

Subject: **Safer Parks Update**

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Is this a key decision?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information or appendices?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, state paragraph number of Schedule 12A, Local Government Act 1972, Part 1:	
Are there implications for equality and diversity?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

1. Purpose of this Report

- 1.1 Following the briefing provided to the Place Regeneration and Housing Committee in July 2022 this report updates the Committee on the findings of the Safer Parks research and the next steps.

2. Information

- 2.1 In October 2021, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority won £383,000 of Home Office ‘Safer Streets’ funding to support the safety of women and girls in parks, contributing to the work of the CA on the Mayor’s pledge to keep women and girls safe.
- 2.2 The bid was a collaboration between the West Yorkshire Combined Authority policy team and the policing and crime team and included research with the University of Leeds on women and girls’ perception of safety in parks. This research was carried out in early 2022 and the [final report](#) was published in December 2022.

Research Aims

- 2.3 This research aimed to better understand what women and girls perceive makes parks feel safe and unsafe, and why. It sought professionals’ views too, providing a comparison. The research was conducted across West Yorkshire, in 2022, with 67 women aged 19-84 years, 50 girls and young women aged

13-18 years and 27 professionals from parks and urban design services in local government and police.

2.4 Methodology

Participants rated their agreement or disagreement with 49 statements relating to feelings of safety in parks. Afterwards, participants reflected on reasons for their views in interviews and focus groups, adding a rich qualitative understanding. The plural viewpoints, outlined below, capture the dominant perspectives that exist in relation to how women, girls and professionals perceive safety in parks, alongside areas of consensus in views.

2.5 Findings

2.6 **Women** - There were 3 predominant viewpoints found for women, with eight areas of consensus across the three viewpoints. Women agree:

- Busier parks feel safer because of increased passive surveillance and opportunities to seek help. Facilities, activities, mixed uses and staffing throughout the day support busyness.
- The presence of other women in parks is reassuring and signals a safer place, but women-only areas are not the solution.
- Organised group activities support women to feel safer and extend their use of parks, though choice and timing of activities should be expanded.
- Fences or walls around the edges of parks limit escape and visibility, whilst openness feels safer by helping women to spot dangers and take action.
- It is safer to ignore than challenge unwanted comments and attention in parks, so as to avoid escalation and unsafe situations. Yet, leaving male harassment unchallenged perpetuates injustice.
- Seeing other users of a similar identity in parks feels reassuring, though a diversity of users suggests parks are inclusive.
- Women cannot rely on other park users to intervene in harassment, but busier parks increase the probability for bystander intervention.
- Mobile phone apps where women can allow trusted contacts to track their journeys may be useful in parks but trade freedom for safety.

In addition, there was general agreement among women that parks feel unsafe after dark, but women differ as to whether they think something can be done to parks to make them feel safe enough to use at these times, with diverse views on lighting.

2.7 **Girls** - There were 3 predominant viewpoints found for girls, with five areas of consensus across the three viewpoints. Girls agree:

- Help points in parks would be reassuring if they provided access to assistance quickly.
- Being near the edges of parks feels safer because it is easier to escape and you can be seen by people in surrounding streets and buildings.

- Like other public spaces, parks do not feel safe after dark. But fears are heightened by a lack of lighting and limited sightlines in parks as well as secluded areas or dense vegetation.
- Secluded or hidden areas of parks feel unsafe because they can conceal threatening people, provide places to be trapped and impede being seen or seeing others.
- Parks feel safer during daylight hours, but not always due to unsafe situations and knowledge of attacks or harassment in certain parks.

A photo elicitation activity of play spaces revealed:

- Girls prefer open play spaces with good outlook in contrast to enclosed spaces, typified by fenced courts/Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs), where they could be 'trapped'.
- Girls generally perceived MUGAs and skate parks as male-dominated and exclusionary.
- Girls liked 'sociable' and active play equipment such as swings and hammocks, which allow them to hang out with their friends.
- Girls liked park designs perceived as 'mixed' and 'equitable' with space 'for everyone'. Parks and play space designs that were age- and gender-sensitive were preferred, underscoring the need for co-design with teenage girls.

2.8 **Professionals** - Professionals have similar views on how to support women and girls to feel safe in parks, and what makes parks feel unsafe. Recognising the importance of feelings of safety as well as crime reduction, they feel that:

- Changes can be made to make parks both safer and feel safer.
- Violence and harassment are issues in all types of public and private spaces, and this needs to change for women and girls to feel safer.
- Signs of disorder, people behaving inappropriately or unpredictably and using drink or drugs make women and girls feel unsafe in parks.
- Busier parks are safer and feel safer because there is more passive surveillance.
- Parks should be designed with facilities and amenities that appeal to women, girls and families, thereby signalling parks as safe places.
- Visible staffing helps by providing opportunities for support, reporting and reassurance.
- Physical interventions, such as lighting and CCTV, can be pursued where there is budget and opportunity. Security should be well-designed and subtle to fit the purpose and atmosphere of parks and minimise fear.
- Visibility and openness can be maximised in certain areas of parks, including cutting down overgrown vegetation to reduce hidden areas, raising canopies and lowering shrubs. This can be accommodated alongside natural or wooded areas that provide diversity of experiences and are important for biodiversity.

2.9 Summary

When women and girls feel unsafe, they are less likely to use, enjoy and benefit from parks, particularly when alone and after dark. Parks and play spaces should be better designed and managed to be busier, sociable places that offer activities and facilities that are welcoming to women and girls and provide opportunities to seek help. Changes should support women and girls to feel safe throughout the day and all-year round. Changes to parks must be part of a holistic, multi-agency approach that challenges the harmful norms, attitudes and behaviours that sustain male harassment and violence against women and girls in parks and wider society, to address root causes of women and girls' unsafety.

2.10 Recommendations

In summary, parks and play spaces should be better designed and managed to be busier, sociable places that offer activities and facilities that are welcoming to women and girls and provide opportunities to seek help. Changes should support women and girls to feel safe throughout the day and all-year round.

Detailed recommendations were made in the report around funding, enabling busier parks, inclusive play spaces, the presence of park staff and wider authority figures, design for openness, visibility and escape, perceptions of safety after dark and addressing fear of/incidents of sexual harassment and violence in parks.

2.11 Next steps

A successful bid was made by the University of Leeds in May 2022 (supported by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and West Yorkshire Police) to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), for £40k to progress the partnership, learn from the research findings, and plan new research in this field. This includes a two-day international symposium in May 2023, bringing together academic and non-academic stakeholders working on the prevention and reduction of violence against women and girls in public spaces.

The Safer Streets bid included a commitment and £19k of funding to write guidance on the design and management of parks. The successful ESRC bid has brought other partners on board meaning that we can now extend this guidance to a national audience. A steering group, made up of the University of Leeds, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Make Space for Girls and Keep Britain Tidy (who administer the Green Flag award scheme for well-managed parks and green spaces) has been set up and has begun to develop principles for this guidance, and will draft a brief for an external consultant/s to write the document and publish in 2023. The guidance will include a set of principles, case studies and ideas of simple, low-cost changes that can make a difference, to reflect the current challenges around funding for park maintenance and management.

Following the publication of the guidance, it is hoped that the Combined Authority can work in partnership with other organisations across sectors to develop proposals and attract funding for physical installations and other changes to parks and park management that follow the guidance principles. These changes could be the subject of further academic research – at present, there is very little useful data on what has been successful.

3. Tackling the Climate Emergency Implications

- 3.1 The desired outcome of the programme is parks and green spaces that attract more women and girls because they feel safe. Although this does not have a direct impact on the climate emergency, it increases the popularity of parks, improving their financial viability. Physical activity in parks and green spaces is an alternative to other, higher carbon recreational activities. Interventions in parks to improve safety and encourage use by women and girls will need to be balanced against impacts on biodiversity and carbon, for instance where installing lighting or cutting back vegetation.

4. Inclusive Growth Implications

- 4.1 Improving access to and use of green space can be part of the solution to addressing serious health inequalities.

5. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 5.1 As well as benefitting women and girls, parks that feel safer help others who have a heightened fear and risk of crime, such as those with other protected characteristics.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 Costs have already been met for the work to date and the guidance document.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

8. Staffing Implications

- 8.1 There are no staffing implications.

9. External Consultees

- 9.1 No external consultations have been undertaken.

10. Recommendations

- 10.1 That the Committee note the content of the report and provide any feedback.

11. Background Documents

The research report can be accessed at
<https://futureofparks.leeds.ac.uk/safer-parks/>

12. Appendices

None