

# Report on Changing Patterns of Urban Park Usage in Dublin City Council Catchment Area During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Report Title

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Comhairle Cathrach  
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# Executive Summary



# Report on Changing Patterns of Urban Park Usage in Dublin City Council Catchment Area During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Executive Summary

Dublin City Council's (DCC) urban parks became a vital resource to Dublin citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report investigates the changing patterns of urban park usage in the Dublin City Council catchment area during the COVID-19 Pandemic. We developed an online survey to identify the health and social benefits of parks, changing patterns of usage and what citizens expect from their parks now and in the future.

Our survey reached out to 1337 unique residents of the Dublin City Council catchment area of whom 96% were adults and 4% were children aged 10 to 17 years old. Most respondents (93.4%) stated that they agree or strongly agree that Dublin parks are a good use of taxpayer's money. Just over half of all adult respondents (52.1%) were working remotely from home due to COVID-19 restrictions. The majority of respondents (87.3%) were house dwellers. Most respondents have access to an outdoor space for recreation (93.6%), and 87.7% stated that they had access to a public park.

Almost half (46.1%) of respondents said they visit a park daily, while 32.1% visit the park twice a week. Dublin City Council parks are less than a 10-minute walk away from 68.4% of respondent's homes. This is in keeping with previous literature on the importance of proximity of parks to urban dwellings and rate of visitation. Most respondents stated that they walk (81.9%) to the park, while 12.8% drive and only 4.4% cycle or scoot. The uptake of public transport to access Dublin parks is very low (less than 1%), and there is a noticeable increase in the number of respondents who drive to the park if they live more than a 10-minute walk from the park.

Before the pandemic, respondents understandably visited the park much less frequently during the working week (Monday to Friday) compared to the weekends. During COVID-19, DCC parks have seen a steady increase of usage during working days that is comparable to weekend usage. There was a noticeable increase in the time spent in Dublin parks during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the length of stay between 30 minutes and 1 hour remained stable (48%), there were significant increases in the length of stay between 1-2 hours (from 23.3% to 31.3%) and 2 hours or more (from 4.9% to 8.5%). Lengths of stay of less than 30 minutes pre pandemic (24%) dropped by half to 12% during the pandemic.

The most common online information resource used to find out about park facilities and upcoming events was Facebook (32.2%), followed by the Dublin City Council website (27%) and Twitter (16.2%). This suggests that there is no 'one-stop shop'

information source for Dublin park facilities and events. Of significance to DCC is the fact that 28.9% of respondents are not using any of these platforms to get information about DCC parks and events. This communication breakdown may warrant further exploration by DCC.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most respondents (71.6%) said they were visiting other parks, and the main reason given was 'change of scenery'. Respondents placed the most importance on going to a park for their mental health, with 85.5% respondents saying that this was either fairly or very important and also for their physical health (83.65%) overall wellbeing (82.2%), with a much smaller cohort of respondents singling out social life (44.8%). This focus on mental health can likely be explained by the social restrictions and loneliness experienced by citizens during the pandemic.

Participants were asked to list the most common reason for visiting parks and all the answers given were individually calculated by activity out of 100%. The most common reasons were 'walking' (86.2%), 'to improve my wellbeing' (75.1%), 'to experience and get close to nature' (59.4%), 'for rest and relaxation' (54.2%), and 'to spend time in a quiet place' (43.6%). Sports and fitness activities were mentioned significantly less as activities that respondents did frequently or all the time: running/jogging (17.5%), cycling (10.6%), playing organised sports/activities (10%) and using outdoor gym equipment (3.2%).

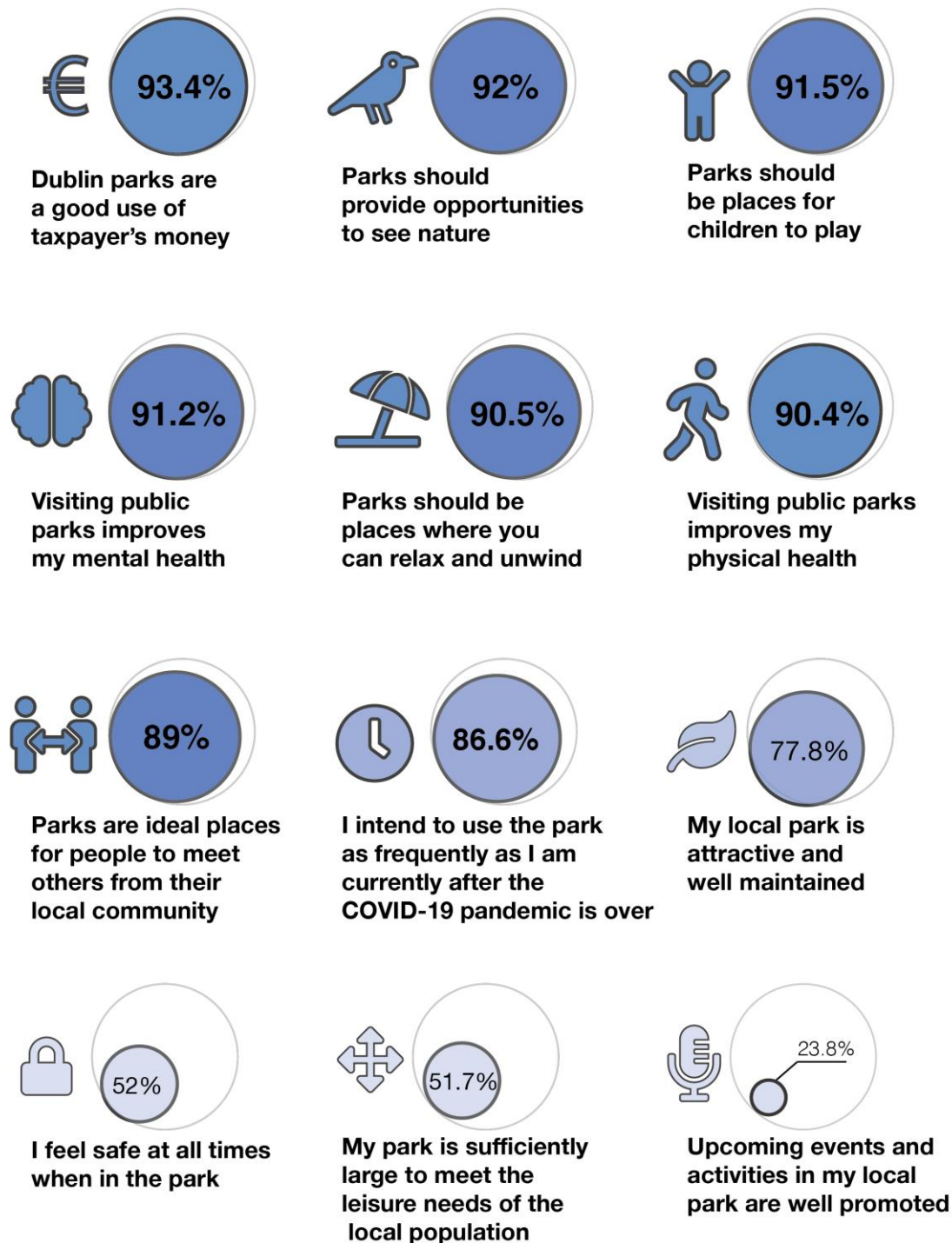
The single most attractive element of parks for respondents with children was the presence of a playground (26.1%) followed by 'nature' (15.4%) and open/green space (11.1%). When asked to rank a list of events they would like to see in their park in the future, 28.3% of respondents ranked open air markets as their number one event, followed by family days (20.5%) and music concerts (15.6%).

The number one issue which impacted on park usage was the lack of toilets in their park, with 41.8% of respondents citing this issue. The next two most common issues were overcrowding (34.3%) and dog fouling (30.4%). It is likely that the issue of overcrowding is unique to the pandemic, similar to the focus on mental health benefits and the increased weekday park usage. When asked what facilities and resources they would like to see in their local park in the future to make it more enjoyable, interesting, and welcoming, the most common responses were toilets (25%), catering facilities (18.2%), ample bins (4.6%) and seating (4%), all of which involve infrastructure investment.

Looking to the future, respondents felt that the key priorities for Dublin City Council to focus their attention on in relation to parks are 'more planting greenery/trees' (34.3%), followed by 'better facilities in the park' (17.2%) and 'more socialising initiatives' (16.1%).



Figure 2 Percentage of People Who Agree or strongly Agree with the statements below



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author: Marcos Dias

1

# Introduction



## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Public Parks and the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the United Nations, 55% per cent of the world's population resided in urban areas in 2018. It is predicted that the world's urban population will increase to 68% in 2050. (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019: xix,1). This was led primarily by the population shift from rural areas to cities. Simultaneously, humanity has never spent so little time in physical contact with nature and animals (Mailer et al, 2009), the long-term consequences of which are as yet unclear (Katcher and Beck, 1987). This uncertainty is now compounded by the global experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first case of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was diagnosed in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Ireland had its first confirmed case in Dublin on 29th February 2020 and a pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation (2020) on 11th March 2020. The following day, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced school closures as part of the first lockdown measures within Irish society. Since March 2020, the majority of the global population was subject to various lockdown procedures, thus further minimising humanity's contact with nature.

Dublin's parks were an exception to the lockdown, as they stayed open through all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The full extent of the direct impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children, adults and older people is still being researched and understood. The indirect effects however, may be substantial and widespread, stemming from over-burdened health systems, loss of household income, disruptions to child and adult health services, disruptions to education and work-life balance, social isolation and reduced opportunity for contact with nature and physical activity.



## 1.2 Defining Urban Public Parks

Public parks are urban green spaces, which are designed to be spaces for city dwellers to use recreationally (Hunter et al, 2019). For the purpose of this research report, we define urban public parks as delineated open space areas, mostly dominated by vegetation and water, and generally reserved for public use. Urban parks are usually locally defined (by authorities) as ‘parks’ (Konijnendijk et al 2013 pp 2). Urban parks are mostly larger but can also have the shape of smaller ‘pocket parks’ which are defined as small (typically less than 1 acre) green spaces, generally intended to serve the immediate population (Cohen et al, 2014). Typically, pocket parks have limited to no facilities, offer few or no programs (e.g., facilitated group activities; events), and are not staffed. Respondents predominantly identified both large urban parks and pocket parks as their local park amenities, but also and in some cases, green areas that are not officially defined as parks by Dublin City Council.

## 1.3 The Health Benefits of Urban Parks

Burrows et al (2018) conducted a study which examines the relative importance of park and park visit characteristics for survey participants in Dublin, Ireland. When discussing Dublin parks, they suggest that they offer people an opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle and the intensity which comes with urban living. Their findings confirm that when and why people go to the park is strongly associated with the proximity of their residence to the park, the days of the week when individuals visit the park, and the reasons why they visit are the most important variables when predicting the frequency with

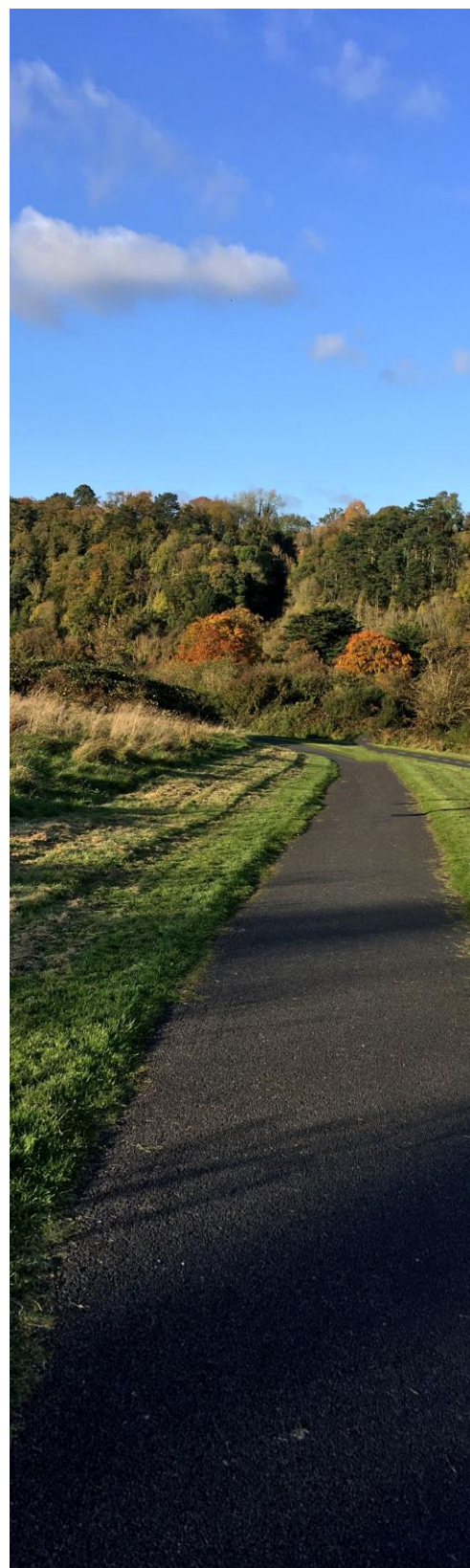


Figure 3 Reprinted with kind permission from M Dias

which they visit parks. They suggest that the priority should be on the provision of park space close to residential areas, so that individuals can engage in activities such as walking and relaxation. Dublin's parks are an important asset for its citizens, providing publicly accessible green space that serves multiple functions: supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of its users, enabling numerous sports and recreation pursuits, serving as a meeting place for families, relatives and friends and hosting music, cultural and community events.

Xie et al (2020) tell us that people living through lockdowns are more prone to stress, depression, anxiety, emotional fatigue, and insomnia (Fofana et al, 2020, Mazza et al, 2020, Ren et al, 2020). Moreover, the longer the lockdown period, the greater the impact on an individual's mental health (Brooks et al, 2020). Several authors have already theorised that the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic collectively on people's mental health may be long-term, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and increased risk of suicide (Zhang, 2020, Gunnell et al, 2020). However, it must be stressed that our knowledge about these developments is still limited. Xie et al. (2020) conducted one of the first online surveys on the role of urban parks during the COVID-19 lockdown in Chengdu, China back in April 2020. They found that:

[...] urban parks and large outdoor, open spaces can provide residents with a place for safe outdoor activities and social interaction in a green environment during a pandemic, as well as serve as a buffer area to maintain favourable health and quality of life (Xie et al, 2020: pp.1 of 17).

Parks also function as natural barriers for noise levels and pollution and provide an important connection between citizens and nature through proximity and convenience. Combine this with the well-documented positive effect of parks on the mental and physical wellbeing of citizens, ensured that parks became the most important social spaces for citizens for the extended period of lockdowns and restrictions, as they provided the safest space to socialise and 'be outside the house', as many respondents pointed out.

## 1.4 The Importance of Proximity to Urban Parks

The proximity to parks is a valuable asset. Recent research has also highlighted how ‘a 10% increase in park space within 2km of a dwelling is associated with a 5.5% increase in that dwelling’s price’ in Dublin (Gillespie, Lyons and McLaughlin, 2020). The proximity to parks is also aligned with the “15-Minute City” concept proposed by Carlos Moreno in 2016 and adopted by major cities across the world with the aim of supporting sustainable and healthy urban living, advocating that a neighbourhood should be planned:

[...] such that all basic facilities could be within reach in 15 min[utes] or less and [include] public spaces [which] allow people to maintain decent health standards and practices such as exercising through walking while reducing social contact. (Moreno et al, 2021, p. 101)

The Dublin Chamber (2020) recently published a report that discusses the implementation of the 15-minute city concept in Dublin, suggesting that Dublin residents should, “be connected to their local community through safe, accessible, and well-connected footpaths and cycle paths [and] have access to an open greenspace and high-quality public realm”. Ensuring that parks are integrated with an adequate network of footpaths and cycle paths is an important aspect of the sustainable vision of the 15-minute concept, and consideration should be given to this connection.

## 1.5 Research Aim: Identify the Changing Patterns of Urban Park Usage in the Dublin City Council Catchment Area During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The importance of parks has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns and restrictions of movement and activities. In Ireland a significant increase in use of public parks was registered in the early months of the pandemic. For example, in Cork, several parks and popular green walks saw big increases in visitors from April 2019 (pre-COVID-19) to April 2020 (post-COVID-19), in some cases more than double the number of visitors pre-COVID-19, such as the



streamside Ballybrack walk in Douglas/Donnybrook, which saw an increase of 121% in that period (Barker, 2020).

The 2km and 5km restrictions combined with the restrictions for meeting indoors and the move towards working online from home were all factors in the increased uptake of Dublin park usage. This, combined with the well-documented positive effect of parks on the mental and physical wellbeing of citizens ensured that parks became the most important social spaces for citizens for the extended period of lockdowns and restrictions, as they provided the safest space to socialise and 'be outside the house', as many participants pointed out.

Our main aim was to capture this increase in uptake and to investigate the changing patterns of usage of Dublin's urban parks during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also wanted to find out what park users valued most and how the increased uptake could be maintained by catering to the needs and desires of Dublin's park users. Through a detailed survey that targeted all age cohorts across the Dublin catchment area, we were able to assemble a comprehensive snapshot of the status of park usage in Dublin, and also to get insights on how this increased uptake can be maintained in the near future as a desirable social outcome for Dublin's citizens and the Dublin City Council. We hope to run future surveys that will help us compare the current state of park usage (as some COVID-19 restrictions remain in place) with park usage in a near future where we can (hopefully) get back to some degree of normality post-pandemic.

# 2

## Methodology and Respondent Profiles



## Chapter 2. Methodology and Respondent Profiles

To examine Dubliner's use of urban public parks across Dublin during the COVID-19 pandemic we designed and implemented an online survey. Ethical approval was received for this research project prior to its commencement. The survey consisted of 53 questions which included multiple choice questions, open-ended questions and rank order questions. The survey ran from Monday 15th to Sunday 28th March 2021. Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling. We emailed Dublin-based groups and schools and contacted other prospective respondents through social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Dublin City Council posted a link to the survey via their Twitter page and their website. We sent out reminder emails on Wednesday 24th of March and gained extra respondents this way.

### 2.1 Survey Respondents' Profile

Our survey gathered responses from 2237 respondents, of which 1337 were respondents living within Dublin City Council's catchment area. Of these respondents, 1279 were adults and 58 were children aged 10-17. Just over 27.2% of respondents identified as male, 72% identified as females and 0.8% other/preferred not to state their gender. Of the adults, 57.8% were married, 23.9% were single, 16.3% were living with a partner, and 2% were widowed. The most common ethnicity was White Irish (90.2%), followed by any other white background (8.4%). All other ethnic backgrounds accounted for 2%. Due to the lockdown, Dubliners experienced a significant change in their work patterns. Most adults were working remotely from home due to COVID-19 (52.1%). The other work categories included: working outside the home (16.8%), retired (11.4%), full time homemakers (6.2%), working remotely from home as always (4.4%), and currently unemployed due to COVID-19 (4.3%).

### 2.2 Dwelling Types

Most respondents stated that they live in a house (87.3%), followed by an apartment (11.6%) and a bungalow (1.1%). Many respondents have access to outdoor space for

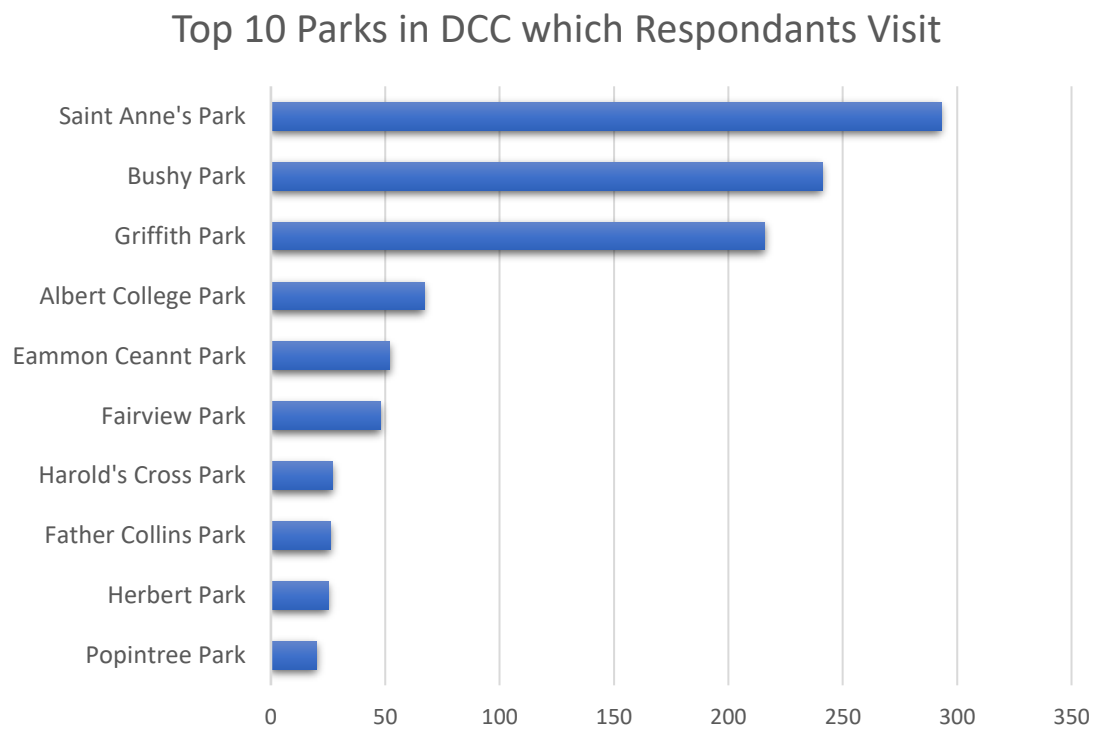


recreation (93.6%), and only 6.4% say they do not. When asked which outdoor spaces they had access to, the most common answer was a public park, with 87.7% of respondents in Dublin City Council catchment area stating they have access to this space.

### 2.3 Parks Visited

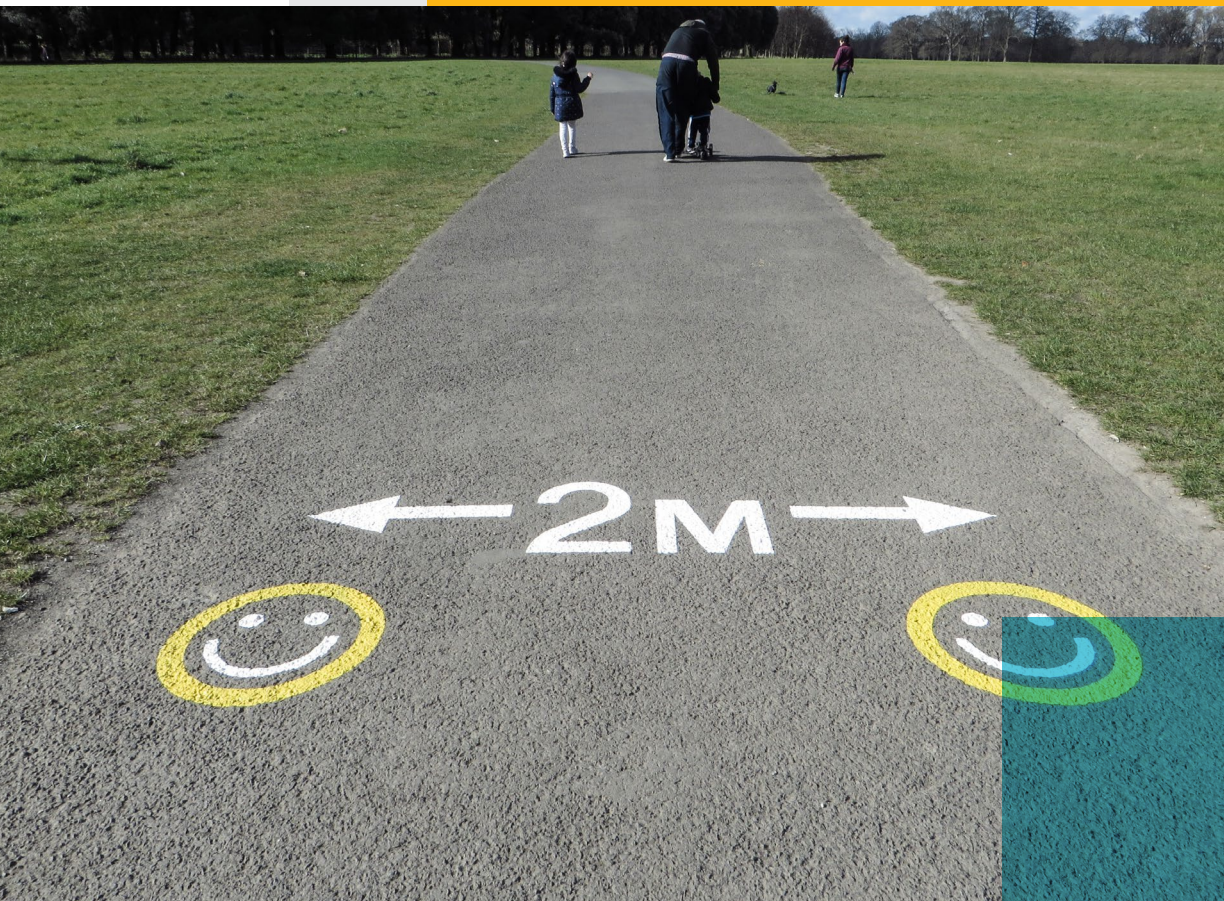
Respondents identified 75 separate local parks within the Dublin City Catchment Area in their answers (see Appendix A for more details). The top 5 parks in the Dublin City Council catchment area which are local to the survey respondents are Saint Anne's Park (293 respondents), Bushy Park (241 respondents), Griffith Park (216 respondents), Albert College Park (67 respondents) and Eamonn Ceannt Park (52 respondents). See table 1 for the top 10 Parks in the DCC catchment areas which the survey respondents visited.

Table 1 Top 10 Parks Visited in DCC Catchment Area



3

# COVID-19 and Park Usage

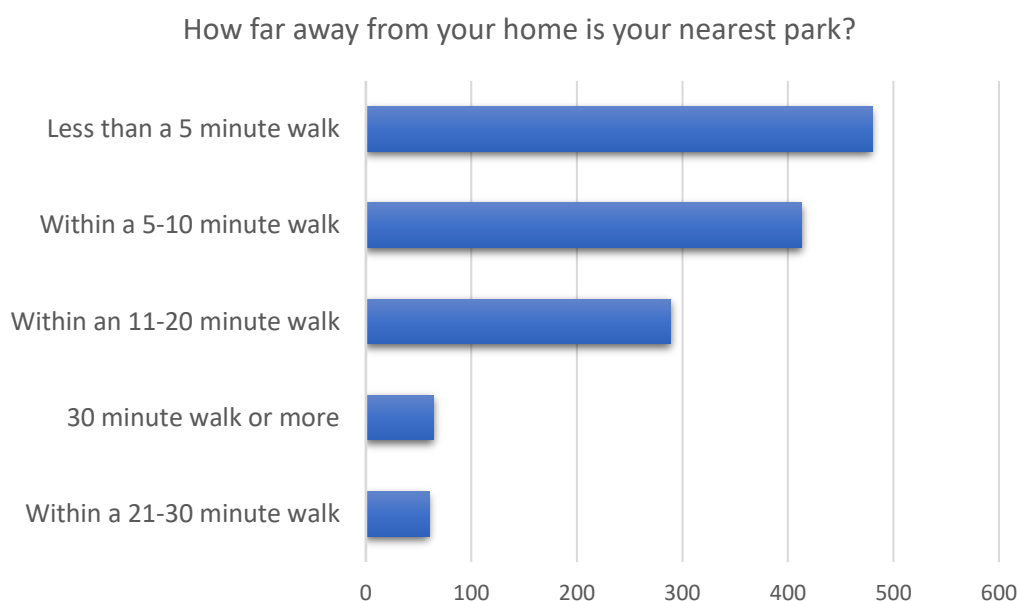


## Chapter 3. COVID-19 and Park Usage

### 3.1 How Respondents Travel to the Park

Understanding how physically close respondents were living to parks in the Dublin City Council catchment area was an important part of the survey. We asked respondents ‘How far away from your home is your nearest park?’ and 1306 respondents answered this question. The most common answer was that respondents were living less than a 5-minute walk away from their nearest park (36.8%). This was followed by ‘within a 5–10-minute walk’ (31.6%), ‘an 11–20-minute walk’ (22.1%), ‘within a 21–30-minute walk’ (4.6%), and ‘a 30-minute walk or more’ (4.9%). Most respondents (68.4%) do not have to walk more than 10 minutes from their homes to get to a park. Please see Table 2 or a full breakdown of responses.

*Table 2 Distance from Residence to Nearest Public Park*



We then asked respondents how they usually get to the park and 1252 respondents answered this question. The most common answer was that they walk to the park (81.9%), followed by driving to the park (12.8%), cycling/ using a push scooter (4.4%), using an electric scooter/electric bike (0.3%) and other (0.6%). The high number of participants who walk to the park is mirrored in the physical closeness of parks to

respondents' homes. Of the respondents who reported driving to the park, almost three quarters (74.7%) told us they live more than 10 minutes' walk away from their nearest park. The further away the park is from the respondent's home, the more likely they are to drive rather than cycle or use public transport. Please see Table 3 for a more detailed breakdown of results.

*Table 3 Distance From Nearest Park Crossed With Transport*

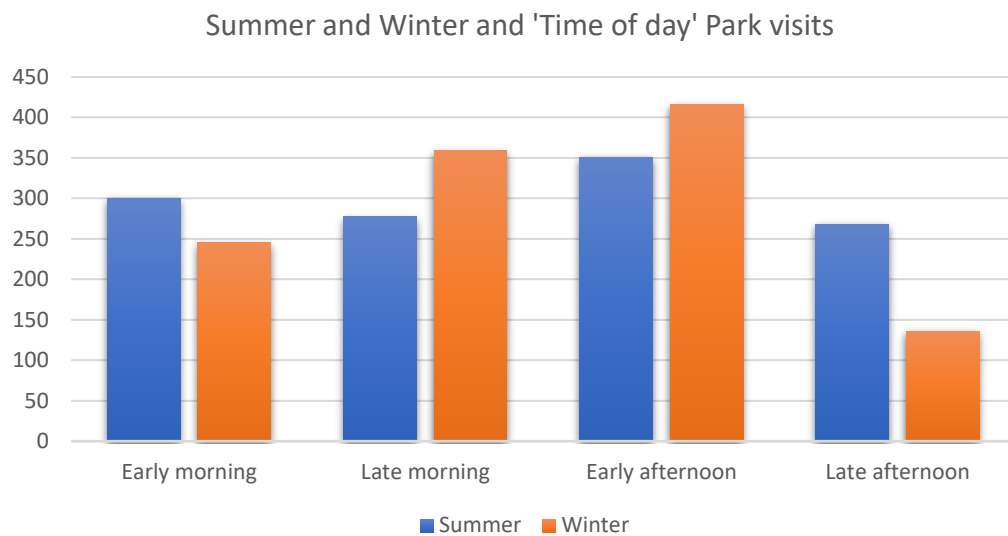
	Walk	Drive	Public transport	Cycle/push scooter	Electric scooter/ bike	Other
Less than a 5 min walk	439	12	0	8	1	1
Within a 5-10 min walk	342	28	1	15	0	2
Within an 11-20 min walk	211	49	0	20	2	1
Within a 21-30 min walk	18	29	0	4	1	2
30 min walk or more	13	40	0	8	0	1

### 3.2 Seasonal Variation in Park Visits

We asked respondents what time of the day they tend to visit the park during the Summer and Winter months. Respondents reported a fairly even distribution of when they visited the park during summer, with late afternoon being the least popular time (22.4%) and early afternoon being the most popular time (29.3%). The least popular time during winter and summer was late afternoon (11.8%) and the most popular time in both winter and summertime was early afternoon (36%). Please see Table 4 for a full breakdown of answers. Thus, parks are more evenly populated during the summer months, while in the winter months there are more obvious peak times for park visitation.



Table 4 Comparison Between Park Visitation Hours in Summer and Winter



At the time of the survey, almost half (46.1%) of respondents said they visit a park on a daily basis, 32.1% visit the park twice a week, 18.2% visit it once a week, 3.1% visit a park monthly, and only .6% visit a park less than once a month.

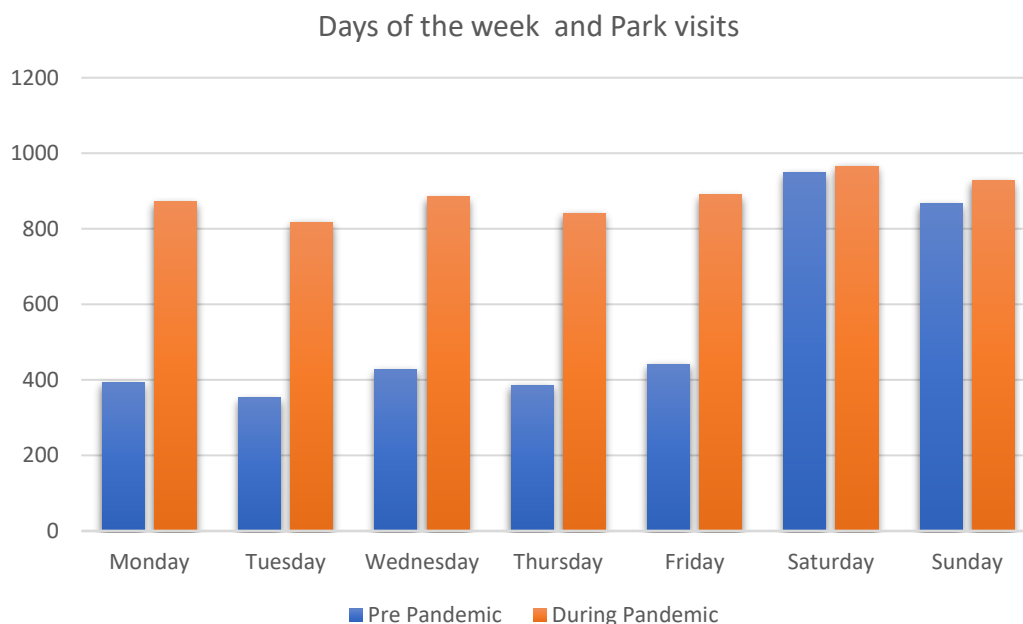
### 3.3 Changes in Patterns of Usage During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our survey identified key changes in usage of Dublin parks during the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked participants which days of the week they used the park before the COVID-19 pandemic, and then during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, the most popular day of the week to visit a park was Saturday, with 70.9% of respondents saying they regularly used the park on this day. This was followed by Sunday, with 64.8% saying they also used the park on this day. While the weekend usage was high before the pandemic, respondents' use of the park during the weekdays was low, ranging from 26.4% to 33.31%.

To compare, we then asked participants which days of the week they were using the park during the COVID-19 pandemic. The least popular day to visit during the pandemic was Tuesday (61.2%), while the most popular day was still Saturday (72.3%). The least popular day of the week to visit a park pre-pandemic (Tuesday, 26.4%) saw an increase in usage of 34.8% during the pandemic. Please see Table 5 for

a full breakdown of results. During COVID-19 parks have not only seen a steady increase of usage, but also a more distributed pattern of usage where the difference between working days and weekend days is minor.

Table 5 Comparison Between Park Visitation Pre and During COVID-19



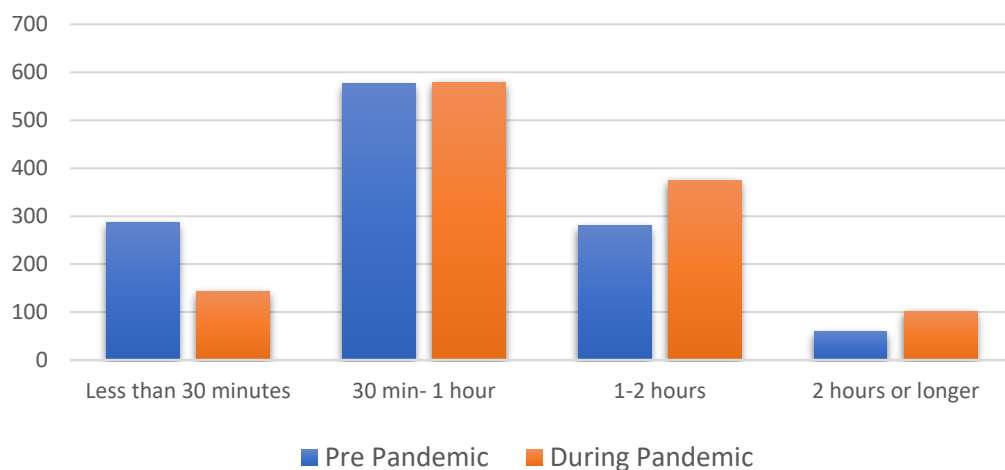
This could be partly explained by the significant proportion of participants who indicated that they were working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the fact that most participants live less than 10 minutes away from their nearest park. The increased flexibility incurred by working from home has enabled citizens to access their local parks during working days, when they might otherwise have been away from home during working hours and thus not within close distance from their local parks.

Another noticeable difference in pattern of usage before and during the COVID-19 pandemic was the time spent in the park. We asked respondents about the average length of their stay in a park before the pandemic. Participants mainly said 30 minutes to 1 hour (48%), followed by less than 30 minutes (23.8%), 1-2 hours (23.3%) and 2 hours or more (4.9%). When we then asked participants about the duration of their

stay in a park during the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw that the average length of stay had increased. While 30 minutes to 1 hour was still the most common length of stay (48.3%), staying for 1-2 hours increased to 31.3% and staying for 2 hours or more increased to 8.5%. Staying for less than 30 minutes decreased to 11.9%. Please see Table 6 for a full breakdown of answers. This indicates that citizens were spending more time in parks during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they also went more regularly during working days (Monday to Friday).

Table 6 Comparison of Visitation Length Pre and During COVID-19

### Length of Park Visit Pre and During pandemic



To summarise, there is clear evidence of increased usage of Dublin parks during the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the frequency of usage across weekdays and the amount of time spent in the parks. Most respondents (88.6%) told us that they intend to use the park as frequently as they are now once the COVID-19 pandemic is over.



4

# Park Activities and Health Benefits



## Chapter 4. Park Activities and Health Benefits

When I walk in the park, I am breathing fresh air which helps oxygenate my blood which helps my lungs. While walking I am improving my physical health and may lose weight, also if I meet someone in the park and talk to them I do not feel so isolated which also helps my mental health (female, aged 18-24)

As stated above in Chapter 1, as early as April 2020 (just four months into the pandemic in China) Xie et al (2020) concluded that urban parks and large outdoor, open spaces can provide residents with a place for safe outdoor activities and social interaction in a green environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as serve as a buffer area to maintain favourable health and quality of life.

### 4.1 Importance of Parks to Individual's Health

We asked respondents about the importance of going to a park for their health; specifically, their physical, mental, social and overall wellbeing. Respondents placed almost equal importance on visiting parks for their physical (83.6%) and mental (83.5%) health with respondents rating this as fairly or very important. Visiting the park as fairly or very important for respondents' overall wellbeing was similarly rated at 82.2%. In relation to socialisation needs, 44.8% told us that visiting the park is fairly or very important. As one respondent told us:

During COVID it lifts my mood to see other people walking and enjoying the park— it reminds me we are not all alone even though I work alone most of the day. Looking at nature also helps me stop worrying about 'the small things' and helps me clear my head (female, aged 25-44)

Survey respondents were asked to answer several statements about their expectations of Dublin parks in general and their experience or perceptions of how well their local park met these expectations, which included several statements related to respondent's health and park visits.

- 90.4% of respondents agreed with the statement: 'Visiting public parks improves my physical health'
- 91.2% agreed with the statement: 'Visiting public parks improves my mental health'

- 90.5% agreed with the statement: ‘Parks should be places where you can relax and unwind’
- 89% agreed that: ‘Parks are ideal places for people to meet others from their local community’

#### 4.2 How Parks Specifically Help Individual’s Overall Wellbeing’

The belief that contact with nature is beneficial to human health and well-being has been researched by multiple disciplines and through several perspectives such as environmental psychology, environmental health, psychiatry, biology, ecology, landscape architecture, horticulture, leisure and recreation, wilderness, and of course public health policy and medicine (Maller et al 2009). In response to the question ‘Please tell us how you feel the park specifically helps your overall wellbeing’, we received 926 narrative responses which were analysed using content analysis. Four major categories/themes emerged from the analysis: mental health, physical health, socialisation and contact with nature. Please see Table 7 for a full breakdown of themes and codes. For many of the respondents, the park offered more than just relaxation, as one participant stated: “It helps by just being outside and close to nature. I enjoy being there and feel calm and relaxed after a visit even if I’ve been running around with my children” (female, aged 25-44).

Table 7 How Parks Improve my Overall Wellbeing - Codes and Themes

Nature	Mental Health	Physical Health	Socialisation
Contact / access to nature	Calming	Exercise	Being outdoors
Contact / access to wildlife	Clear my head / mind	Walking	Child / family friendly
Fresh air	Improves mood	Sport	
Large / green open space	Improves well being	Running	Sense of community
Peaceful / tranquil	Increased relaxation	Socialisation	
No / reduced noise	Rejuvenating	Being outdoors	Social interaction
No / reduced traffic	Reduce anxiety	Child / family friendly	
Sounds of nature	Reduce stress	Sense of community	Break from work
Safe space / place		Social interaction	
Water source		Break from work	
Beauty – scenery			



#### 4.2.1 Relaxation

Our respondents overall told us that parks were very beneficial for maintaining their mental health during the lockdown period. The most common aspect mentioned was their ability to 'relax' in parks. We know that interactions with nature are significantly associated with relaxation (Liu et al 2017) as one respondent told us, "I feel relaxed being close to plants and trees" (female, aged 25-44). Other respondents mentioned the specific aspects of nature in urban public parks which they find relaxing such as "Fresh air and birdsong is relaxing" (female, aged 25-44) and, "It relaxes me to be surrounded by greenery and water - away from traffic noise and concrete" (female, aged 45-64).

#### 4.2.2 'Clears my Head /Mind'

This term to 'clear their head' was used by respondents as having a positive impact on their mental health, as one respondent puts it: 'I always feel better after coming back from the park. "Being in nature helps clear my mind" (female, aged 25-44).

Other respondents were more specific about what enables them to clear their heads, "Open space and fresh air has been vital to clear my head" (female, aged 25-44).



Figure 4 Reprinted with kind permission from DCC

#### 4.2.3 Calm, Stress Reduction and Rejuvenating Impact of Parks



Figure 5 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett

Many respondents told us that they find parks calming, and this is again associated with nature, such as water sources, “It’s very calming being out and about listening to the river and seeing the flowers” (female, aged 45-64); and vegetation, “Being in a green area with trees and plants is very calming” (male, aged 25-

44). The respondents also acknowledged the important ability of parks to assist in stress reduction whether this stress is because of additional workloads such as home-schooling, “If I go to the park stressed from trying to home-school and work or for any other reason, by the time I am leaving this stress has disappeared” (female, aged 25-44); working from home, “Coping with technology while working remotely can be very stressful, the physical movement of walking is a great de-stressor and walking in nature in the park rather than on the roads is very calming and relaxing” (female, aged 45-64). The park also improved respondent’s mood and was a place where they felt rejuvenated, “During Covid it lifts my mood to see other people walking and enjoying the park - it reminds me we are not all alone even though I work alone most of the day. Looking at nature also helps me stop worrying about 'the small things” (female, aged 25-44).

Respondents who suffer from mental health issues described the park as ‘therapeutic’ during the lockdown: ‘Due to COVID related restrictions severely limiting movement, I suffer from panic attacks and anxiety at the thought of being trapped in a small area/space and unable to leave. I also miss spending time in nature, [and] cannot find quiet in the city. Going to the park helps alleviate these fears and discomfort and makes it a bit easier to handle’ (female, aged 25-44). Apartment

dwellers and those with no gardens were heavily dependent on public parks throughout the lockdown for any contact with nature:

Without a garden and having to spend so much indoors parks are really the only time I get to be in green spaces in Dublin which I found essential for my mental health during lockdown (female, aged 25-44). 'I live in a small apartment with no garden and the park allows me to exercise and relieve stress after a day working from home (male, aged 25-44)

#### 4.2.4 Physical Health

Respondents told us that parks are beneficial to their physical health and the main means they suggest of improving their physical health is through exercise, "Fresh air and exercise is vital for body and mind. Walking near a main street with lots of cars passing is not a pleasant experience so an open space like a park or beach is vital" (female, aged 45-64). The park was one of the most important locations for Dubliners to exercise in during the COVID-19 lockdowns:

The park is the main place that I exercise [in] - which itself helps both my mental and physical health. Running in the park (during daylight), feels safer and more relaxing than running through an urban environment due to less conflict with other pedestrians and cars' (male aged 25-44).

The main exercise which respondents took part in was walking for their physical health. However, they also acknowledged the importance of walking in parks specifically for their mental health, "Walking amongst the trees and greenery is very relaxing and improves my mental health" (female, aged 45-64). It is noteworthy that very few of the adult respondents mentioned using exercise equipment installed in the parks.

#### 4.2.5 Socialisation

Respondents found urban parks a great place to socialise safely during the lockdown. The socialisation occurred between distinct groups such as family members, friends and neighbours. Meeting friends and family helped reduce feelings of isolation, "It



allows me to meet with friends for a socially distanced walk and chat and a coffee which helps with feeling isolated” (female, aged 45-64). Parks were viewed as a safe space where Government restrictions and social distancing could be maintained, “Crucially, it is a safe and attractive place to meet friends and family during COVID” (female, aged 25-44). For people living alone or widowed, the park gave them an opportunity during the lockdown to reduce loneliness and interact with others:

If you're feeling low, there's always someone who will greet you. Also I've engaged with people from all walks of life. We discuss and solve the problems of the world every day. I get book and film recommendations on a regular basis. So if I don't see anyone for the rest of the day and feel lonely I know I have my stimulus waiting for me the next morning (female, aged 65-74)



Figure 6 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett

There is a strong sense of community amongst park visitors and many recount bumping into their neighbours in the parks, “I get exercise in the park, I bump into people and have lovely mini-chats” (female, aged 45-64); and “You often unexpectedly meet people from your neighbourhood, which is nice” (female, aged 25-44).

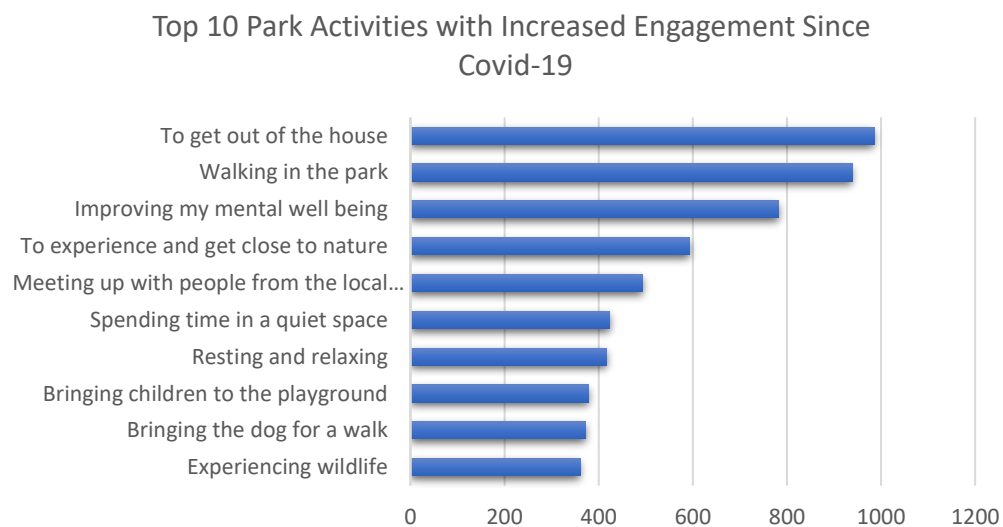
An overwhelming number of respondents told us of the importance of ‘getting out of the house’ for their mental and physical health during lockdown, “Getting out of the house as the four walls feel like they are caving in. Exercise and mentally overall benefits [for] my sanity” (female, aged 45-64). Families found lockdown stressful and family members sought distance and removal from stress triggers (for example

teenagers’ mood changes) by going to parks. Respondents who had previously not used the park as part of their social activities now did so, “Getting out of the house and exercising is important for my physical and mental health and having a park nearby facilitates that. Pre-COVID I would not have engaged in much social activity in local parks” (female, aged 65-74).

#### 4.3 Park Activities

We gave participants a list of park activities and asked them to indicate which activities they were engaging in more since the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions came into force. The top activity in the park was simply being there ‘to get out of the house’, with 73.7% of participants doing this more since the start of the pandemic. This was followed closely by ‘walking in the park’ with 70.2% of participants saying they did more of this since the start of the pandemic. 58.6% of participants said they were going to the park ‘to improve my mental wellbeing’ more than they were before COVID-19 restrictions came into force. 44.4% chose ‘to experience and get close to nature’, 36.9% chose ‘to meet up with people from the local community’ and 31.7% stated ‘spending time in a quiet place’. Please see Table 8. for a full breakdown of answers.

Table 8 Activities with More Engagement During COVID-19



5

# Enablers and Barriers to Park Usage



## Chapter 5. Enablers and Barriers to Park Usage

This chapter examines the respondent's views about what enabled their use of local parks within the DCC catchment area and what acted as a barrier to park usage. This is followed by a discussion on the facilities and resources that respondents would like to see in their local park in the future to make it more enjoyable, interesting and welcoming for their particular age group.

### 5.1 Residential Settings and Proximity to Parks

Perhaps the simplest factor which enabled respondents to visit parks was the distance between their homes and their nearest parks. Most respondents (68.4%) live within a 10 minutes' walk away from a park. Our analysis found that respondents who lived within a 10-minute walk away from their nearest park were more likely to visit the park daily when compared to those respondents living further away. These findings echo what is already known; that proximity to parks in residential settings is a very significant enabler to its usage by local residents. By virtue of the close proximity of urban parks in DCC catchment area, it affords significant convenience to the respondents, as was highlighted frequently in the survey responses. One respondent summed this up in a quote, "It's close to home, it's easy to get to and it's my local park" (female, aged 45-64). A few respondents also identified the advantages of cycling and scooting in parks—such as feeling safe on good track / path surfaces separate from traffic. In addition, they provide convenient thoroughfares between home, work, shopping and leisure destinations.

### 5.2 Changes in Work Patterns and Park Usage

Before the pandemic, the weekends enabled respondents to use the park, with Saturday being the most common day to visit (70.9%), followed by Sunday (64.8%). During the pandemic, the weekends still enabled respondents to use the park and Saturday remained the most popular day (72.3%). However, all five weekdays



(Monday-Friday) saw a statistically significant increase in park visitation. Even the least common day to visit the park pre pandemic (Tuesday, 26.4%) saw an increase in usage of 34.8% during the pandemic. This shows that a high number of respondents were encouraged to use the park during the weekdays because they had started working from home during the pandemic (52.1%). Our analysis found that respondents working outside of the home were less likely to visit the park daily due to their work patterns when compared to respondents working from home. Thus, working from home is a huge enabler for respondents to visit the park more often.

### 5.3 Using Parks to Meet Individual Needs

Dublin City Council made the decision to keep parks open during the pandemic and throughout various COVID-19 restrictions. This decision had significant health, socialisation, and overall wellbeing benefits for Dublin residents, as we have highlighted in previous sections of this report. We asked respondents why they visit their nearest park. We received 976 answers to this open-ended question. We identified 6 separate themes: Overall Wellbeing (46.8%); Social/Family (19.9%); The Natural World (16.2%); Use of Spaces (10%); Good park Infrastructure/Maintenance (4.5%); and Adhering to Government COVID-19 Restrictions (2.6%). All these themes and codes identify ways in which the parks help respondents to meet their own individual needs. Significantly, many of these needs related to the overall wellbeing of respondents.

The simple physical activity of walking was the most common answer, with 16.5% of all respondents saying they go to their nearest park for this reason. Walking allowed respondents to meet their need to be in the green space of a park, while also receiving health benefits from the physical exercise. One respondent told us he likes walking in the park because it provides respite from air and noise pollution, “It’s a pleasant place to walk without the noise and smell of the traffic” (male, aged 25-44). The second most common answer was for exercise in general (8.3%). This exercise included running, jogging and cycling, to name a few. This exercise which participants

chose to do in parks helped to fulfil their need for physical activity, which in turn improved their overall health. One respondent said she goes to the park for exercise because her garden is not large enough to fulfil her needs, “Small private garden, the park offers more space for exercise” (female, aged 25-44). This was closely followed by another reason associated with wellbeing, dog walking. Many participants brought their dogs to the park for some exercise.

Some respondents walked their dog in the park because the park had specific spaces for dogs to roam freely, “There is a dog park to let dogs off leash” (female, aged 18-24). Parks provided the space and opportunity for respondents to walk their dogs, allowing them to fulfil their dogs’ needs as well as their own. The next most popular answer was to have contact with nature, and this fell under the theme of The Natural World. Respondents loved the trees, greenery and flowers in their park. They went to the park to experience nature and it served to improve their mental wellbeing. One respondent told us how this contact with nature was an intrinsic part of her park experience, “I have to pass through some green areas to get to it. New trees planted and flowers” (female, 65-74). The fifth most popular answer was that the park has a playground, and this answer fell under the Social/Family theme. Respondents brought their children, nieces and nephews and grandchildren to their nearest park specifically to visit the playground. Parks served the purpose of having a play space for respondents’ children, which allowed respondents to fulfil their duties as caregivers while also improving their children’s physical wellbeing. One respondent told us that this feature drew her to the park almost every day, “Very good playground which my 8-year-old child loves. We come here nearly every day after her school” (female, aged 25-44). The park mainly fulfilled the purpose of improving respondent’s overall wellbeing, which involved physical exercise, and overwhelmingly, simply walking. The high percentage of people who also went to their nearest park to be close to nature shows us that this is highly valued by participants.

## 5.4 Visiting 'Other' Parks

We asked respondents whether they were visiting other parks since the pandemic started. Most respondents, 937 (71.6%) said they were visiting other parks, while 372 (28.4%) said they weren't. If they stated that they visited other parks, they were then asked why they did so. There were 431 responses to this open-ended question. We identified 5 separate themes: Accessibility, Physical Activities; Restorative Functions; Social Element; and Infrastructure.

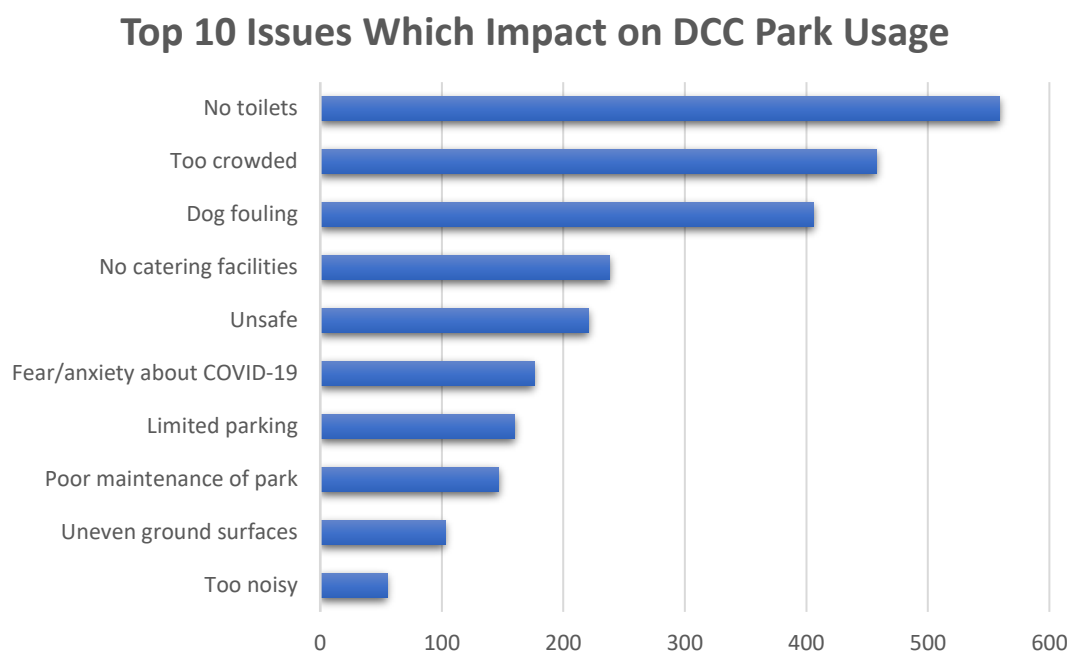
The most common response was associated with accessibility. The benefit of gaining a 'change of scenery' was the most important element to the respondents. This was followed by the park's proximity, being a factor in their visitation. One in ten respondents also visited other parks because they were 'within the 5km restrictions' which were in place at the time of the survey. Whilst in these parks, the most commonly activity identified by respondents was physical activity. Respondents also visited other parks to socialise with friends and family. Only a very small number of respondents mentioned visiting other parks for their child-friendliness. Respondents also visited other parks to avail of their specific infrastructure, in particular playgrounds and catering facilities. Whilst park activities were important to respondents, the main reason they visited other parks was simply for variety as well as proximity to their home.

## 5.5 Most Common Barriers to Park Usage

We devised a list of common issues which may impact on park usage. Respondents were asked to view this inventory and identify the top three issues which affect them the most when it comes to their park usage. Almost half of all respondents (41.8%) identified the lack of toilets in parks as impacting on their park usage. This was followed by the park being too crowded (34.3%). This finding is likely due to social distancing rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dog fouling was the third most common issue cited (30.4%). For a breakdown of the Top 10 issues impacting on park usage, please see Table 9. This data highlights issues which may cause people to

shorten their park visits or avoid visiting parks entirely. By addressing the most common issue reported by respondents, the lack of toilets in parks, Dublin City Council could potentially remove a barrier to park usage highlighted by 41.8% of their park users.

Table 9 Top 10 Issues Affecting Park Usage



When we analysed the open-ended responses to this question. Respondents focused on physical barriers such as restrictive gates ‘Kissing gates are a nightmare for buggies. Just open the gates!’ (male 25-44). A further barrier to park usage focuses on both the width and the surfacing of paths within parks ‘paths too narrow in places’ (male 25-44)

### 5.6 Park Events Communication and Promotion

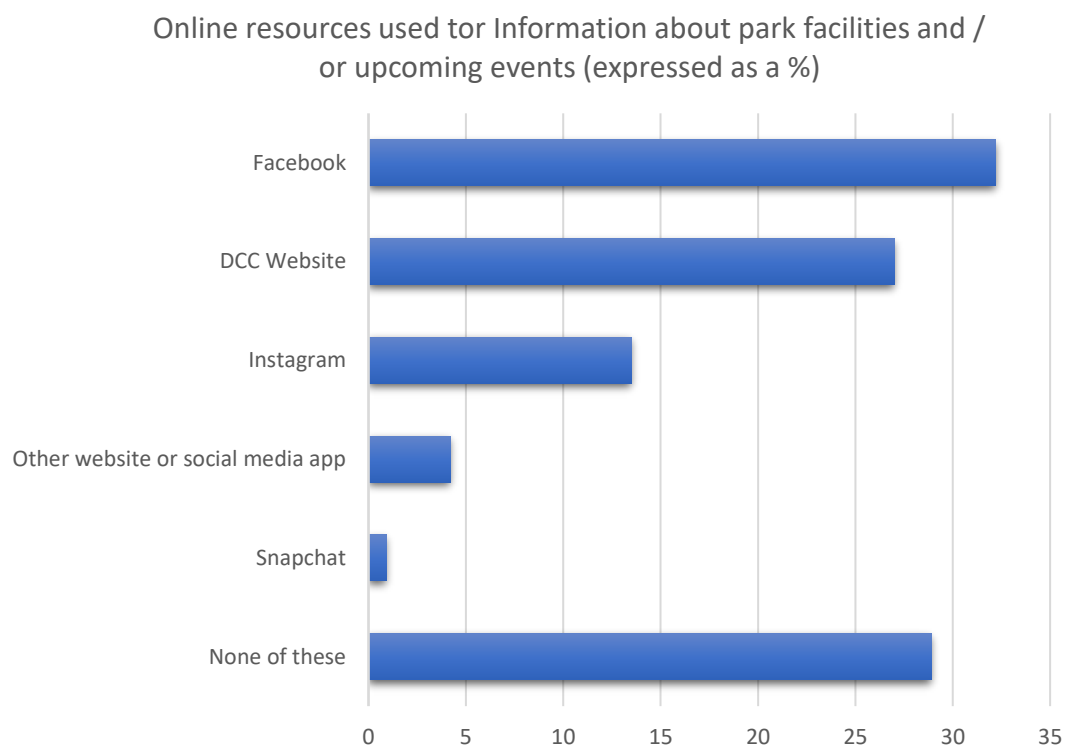
We asked participants to identify which, if any, online information resources they used to find out about park facilities and upcoming events. The most common source was Facebook (32.2%), followed by the Dublin City Council Website (27%) and Twitter (16.2%). Please see Table 10 for a full breakdown of answers. Of significance to DCC is the finding that 28.9% of respondents are not using any of these platforms to get



information about DCC parks and events. This communication breakdown may warrant further exploration by DCC.

While there were no differences between usage of online resources and the gender of respondents, there were differences by age. The DCC website was most accessed by respondents in the 65-74 age group, with 37.4% saying they use it. Facebook was most used by those aged 45-64 (29.9%). Twitter was most used by the 45-64 age group (18.3%). Instagram was most used by the 25-44 age group (15.9%). Snapchat was most used by the 10-17 age group (7.1%). The age group which had the most answers for 'none of these' was 75-84, with half of respondents (50%) stating this. This breakdown by age may be beneficial to DCC as it identified which online sources are currently used by differing age groups and may allow DCC to target specific audiences more effectively.

Table 10 Online Resources Used by Respondents



## 5.7 Future Facilities and Resources

We asked respondents what facilities and resources they would like to see in their local park in the future to make it more enjoyable, interesting and welcoming for their particular age group. A total of 951 respondents answered this question. The most popular answer referred to toilets, accounting for 45% of respondents' answers. One respondent illustrated the need for toilets in her local park:



Figure 7 Reprinted with kind permission from M Dias

Toilets, toilets, toilets. There are no public toilets in [the] park. The only toilets are attached to the tennis club and have been closed for the duration of the pandemic! Very difficult for children and adults if you want to spend a couple of hours in the park (female, aged 25-44)

Catering facilities were the next most popular answer and accounted for 33% of respondents' answers. Cafes and other catering facilities provide a focal point for socialising and taking a break from work, despite not being essentially important as toilets. The increase in usage of parks during the week and the trend of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have significantly

impacted on this finding. One respondent expressed her desire for a cafe in her local park, "There is [no cafe] in [the] park, it is really, really missing this one amenity" (female, aged 25-44). A combination of factors supports the desire for both toilets and catering facilities in parks: the increase in usage of Dublin parks during weekdays possibly due to the large percentage (52.1%) of adult respondents who stated that they were working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of respondents (88.6%) stated that they intend to use the park as frequently as they are now once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. This sustained increase in visitors to the parks suggests that resources such as toilets and catering facilities will become even more important and that an increase in infrastructure investment in Dublin's parks is justified.

The other significant facilities and resources that respondents would like to see in their local parks account for just 15% of respondents' answers: more bins (4.6%), seating (4%), nature trails (3.4%) and playgrounds (6%). One respondent stated that in her local park there are only bins in the playground and the entrance, and that the latter are "always overflowing especially [the] dog waste bin" (female, aged 45-64). Some respondents also provided specific detail on the type of seating that they would like to see in the parks that they visit. For example, "More seats (comfortable ones like those in Fr.Collins park)" (female, aged 75-84); "seating in a well-lit sunny area and also in sheltered areas" (male, aged 65-74); and "covered seats for the rain" (female, aged 45-64). The desire for more bins and seating combined with the desire for more toilets highlight the importance of essential facilities for park goers who want to enjoy longer and more comfortable visits to their parks.



6

# Parks , Play and Families





## Chapter 6. Parks, Play and Families

We asked the adult respondents to tell us about the main attractions of the park for their children. A total of 605 respondents who use parks in the DCC catchment area answered this question. Three differing themes emerged from their responses. The Outdoors (338 responses), Socialisation (274 responses) and Active Pursuits and Facilities (232 responses).

The single most attractive element of parks for respondents with children was the presence of a playground, mentioned by 220 (36.3%) respondents, which is a component of the Socialisation theme. Parents also recognised the importance of the socialising opportunities afforded by the park where their children can meet up with their friends and to a lesser degree the attraction of having catering facilities provided for parents.

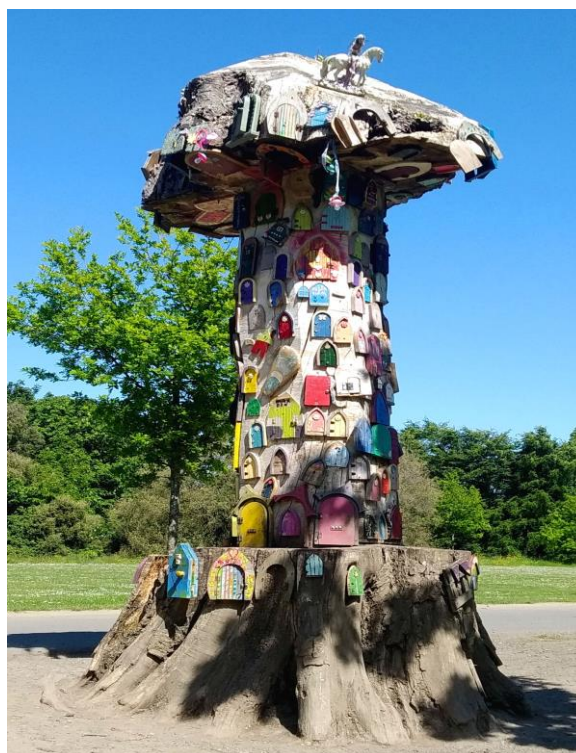


Figure 8 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett

### 6.1 Park as an Imaginative Natural Environment

The Outdoors theme contained the second and third most attractive elements of parks for families: nature (130 respondents or 15.4%) and open/green space (94 respondents or 11.1%). To a lesser extent, respondents also mentioned water sources, tree climbing, wildlife, sense of freedom and fresh air. This demonstrates the appeal of parks for parents that are concerned with the health and wellbeing of their children and see parks as a means of letting their children enjoy the benefits of active pursuits in a natural environment. For example, one respondent expressed an

interest in playgrounds, but also “less formal adventures such as walking through ‘forests’, climbing trees, ‘secret’ passageways/ routes, looking at animals” (female, aged 45-64). Parents also emphasised the importance of parks as an alternative to sedentary activities.

One respondent highlighted the imaginative power of being in a natural environment when describing the benefits for children, “Playground, forest and scrub land for making forts and tunnels and their own games. Also, the ducks and the river” (female, aged 45-64). The Active Pursuits/Facilities theme also had many responses, highlighting a variety of interests from walking to organised sports to skate parks. The most common responses in this theme were sports/sport facilities (89 respondents or 10.5%), running (84 respondents or 4%), cycling (25 respondents or 3%) and walking (26 respondents or 3.1%). Other specific activities/facilities mentioned include skate park, scooting, exercise (non-specified), exercise equipment and play/walk with dogs.

## 6.2 Park as a Safe and Accessible Space for Families

Parks are seen as a safe space for families to do activities together, such as cycling and scooting, as well as an alternative to green spaces that have less convenient access. One respondent stated:

They love the playground and cycling all over the park. Every morning my husband and 10-year-old go cycling in the park for an hour or more - they have started to develop small mountain biking trails in the park with jumps etc as they can't currently escape to the mountains (female, aged 25-44)

The safety factor is also mentioned by one respondent, “Outdoors, but feels safe, they meet friends & get off screens & have ‘old fashioned’ fun” (female, aged 45-64). The element of safety is associated with being away from street traffic, but also with the general quality of footpaths inside parks when compared to citywide footpaths. A respondent stated that, “[The children] enjoy using the smooth surfaces for their scooters as the footpaths [outside the park] are atrocious” (female, aged 25-44).

Parks are an informal space and place for play, and more specifically, child-led imaginative play opportunities, “[The park is] a great amenity for kids to meet up outside and play together, outside of organised activities. They learn social skills and how to use their imaginations. It’s wonderful for children” (female aged 25 – 44).

Other parents emphasised the need to provide facilities for all children, including those with disabilities. For example, one respondent said, “[we have] 3 kids, our younger 2 like to use the play aspect. Our eldest daughter in a wheelchair rarely can get involved as there are little facilities for our disability community” (male, aged 25-44).



Figure 9 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett

### 6.3 Teenage Children and Parks

Some respondents mentioned the specific ways in which their teenage children enjoyed park visits, which involve contact with nature, socialising with their peers, generally ‘hanging out’ and sports activities. One respondent (female 45–64) stated that they had teenagers and therefore the ‘solitude & wildness of park [was] very appealing.’ Another respondent stated, “I have 2 teenagers who like to meet friends in the park to play football, cycle and ‘hang out’” (female, aged 45-64). The social aspect was also mentioned by a mother, who stated that parks were beneficial for their teenage children for “wellbeing and a chance to dress nice/pose and see other teenagers” (female, aged 45-64).

## 6.4 Children and Active Pursuits

In the Active Pursuits and Families theme, the most popular activities/facilities mentioned were sports/sports facilities (10.5%), followed by running (4%), walking (3.1%), cycling 3%, skate park (2.4%) and scooting (1.4%). Skate parks are known to be facilities that cater to teenagers and that involve an element of risk, although they were mostly mentioned in tandem with other activities/facilities, such as playgrounds, sports facilities and climbing trees (another risk-taking activity).

A few parents demonstrated concern for their children using park equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one respondent stated, “[We use] the swings but it’s difficult in the pandemic because I don’t like letting the kids touch everything—I try to go with kids early morning to avoid crowds” (female, aged 18-24). Another respondent stated that they avoid using the playground altogether during the COVID-19 pandemic, “[Our children] also love the playgrounds in the park but we haven't used them during [the] pandemic as they are very busy/crowded” ( female, aged 25-44).

There were a few mentions of grandparents bringing their children to the park, mainly for using the playgrounds, contact with nature (climbing trees) and wildlife (ducks and swans).



Figure 10 Reprinted with kind permission from DCC

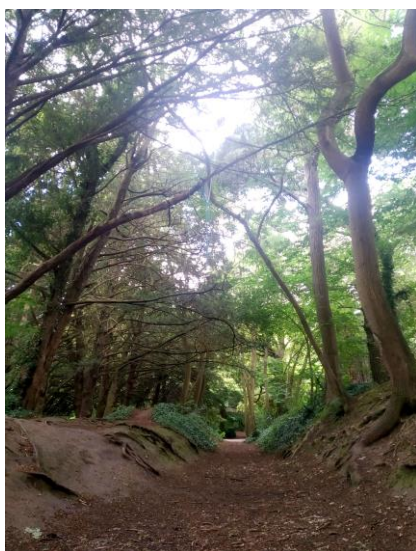


7

# The Future of Parks for Dublin City Council



## Chapter 7. The Future of Parks for Dublin City Council



*Figure 11 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett*



*Figure 12 Reprinted with kind permission from M-J Emmett*

We provided an array of statements and asked respondents to say whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, agreed, or strongly agreed with them. The statement that respondents agreed with the most was ‘Dublin parks are a good use of taxpayer’s money’, with 93.4% of respondents agreeing. The second most agreed with statement was ‘Parks should provide opportunities to see nature’, with 92% of respondents agreeing with this. Third was ‘Parks should be places for children to play’ (91.5%). Fourth was ‘Visiting public parks improves my mental health (91.2%)’. Fifth was ‘Parks should be places where you can relax’ (90.5%). 88.6% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I intend to use the park as frequently as I am currently after the COVID-19 pandemic is over’.

The least agreed with statements were ‘I feel safe at all times when in the park’ (52.5%), which means that just under half of respondents did not always feel safe in parks. Just over half (51.7%) of respondents agreed with the statement ‘My park is sufficiently large to meet the leisure needs of the local population’. Finally, the least

agreed with statement was 'Upcoming events and activities in my local park are well promoted' with only 23.8% of respondents saying they agree with this.

Over half of respondents (55.8%) weren't interested in having an allotment in a local park if it was available, while 44.2% were interested. We then asked the respondents who were interested in an allotment, to order the reasons for their interest from 1-7 in order of preference. 56.1% of respondents put 'growing fruit and veg' at the top of their list, making it the most common reason for wanting an allotment. The next most popular reason was 'to be in the outdoors', (14.3%), followed by 'to improve the ecosystem' (9.3%), 'for my mental health' (8.3%), 'doing gardening' (7%), 'meeting likeminded people' (2.6%), and lastly, 'for my physical health' (2.4%).

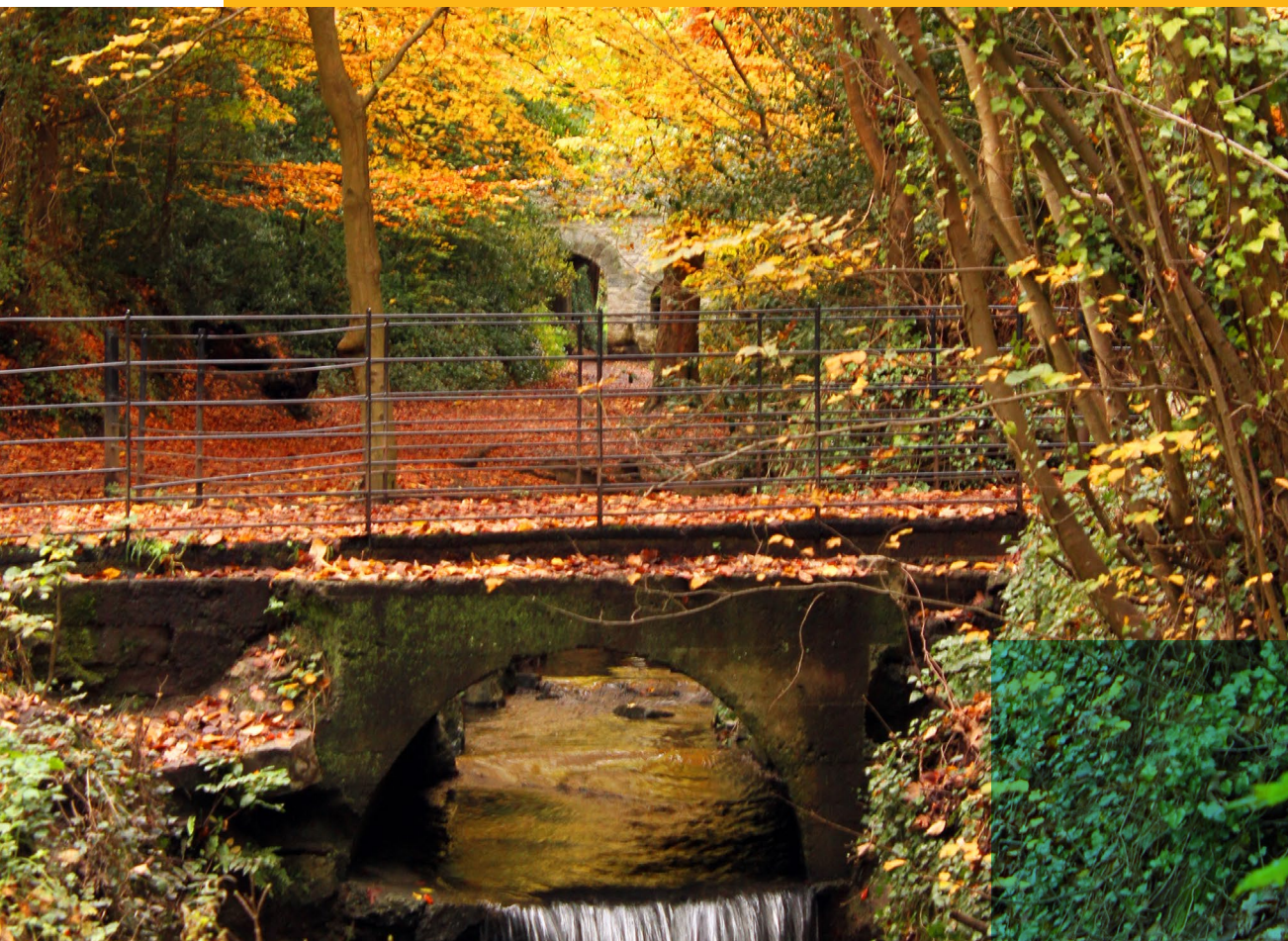
We asked respondents to identify from a list which nature-based amenities and resources they would like to see in their local park. The most popular answer was wild, non-landscaped gardens, with 57.7% of respondents requesting this. The next most popular was 'nature trails' (52.4%), followed by 'walking trails' (51.5%), water-based resources (35.8%), bird watching dens or huts (27.6%), animal watching (22.7%) and last was 'other' (18.3%).

Almost as many respondents have attended a public event held in a park (49.7%) as those who haven't attended one (50.3%). We asked respondents to look at a list of possible events they would like to see in their park in the future. We asked them to rank them in order of their preference, 1 being the most preferred event, 8 being the least preferred event. Open air markets were the event that was most commonly ranked as number one on our respondents' lists (28.3%). This was followed by family days (20.5%), music concerts (15.6%), cultural events (12.6%), pop up theatres or cinemas (10.7%), sporting events (7.2%), other events (3.1%) and exhibitions (2%).



# 8

## Recommendations





## Chapter 8. Recommendations

### 8.1 Overall Health and Wellbeing

As over 90% of survey respondents claim that being able to visit DCC parks during the COVID-19 pandemic directly improved their physical and mental health, we recommend that the important role and functions of Dublin parks in maintaining and improving Dublin citizen's physical, mental and social wellbeing needs to be acknowledged, promoted, supported and its critical role should be reflected in council planning and policy development at a strategic level. It is worth noting that gym equipment in parks has a very low usage by adults surveyed. We recommend that local communities should be consulted in relation to specific requests for new activity facilities and resources as a means to improve diversity and inclusion. The increase in park usage during the COVID-19 restrictions is a direct reflection of the perceived mental, physical and social health benefits of parks by citizens. Therefore, any efforts to sustain this trend by the local councils through the provision of facilities, amenities and events sought by citizens will have a positive impact on the quality of living in Dublin.

A more ecological approach to public health (Morris et al., 2006) is justified and beneficial, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the clear role of public urban parks in meeting the physical, mental, emotional and social health of Dublin citizens. Mental health policy has traditionally focused on person-centred interventions. We recommend that a shift in health and council policy and strategy to include more focus on modifiable environmental determinants for population level mental health status across the DCC catchment area. This would mirror a similar approach to national health policy and strategy focusing on preventable chronic illnesses, for example, Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland (2016).

## 8.2 Infrastructure Investment

The increase in usage of parks during the COVID-19 pandemic and the willingness of Dublin citizens to maintain their patterns of usage of Dublin parks for their mental, physical and social well-being must be accompanied by increased investment in the current infrastructure. Our research has identified key infrastructure components that citizens would like to see in their local parks. Toilets, seating, bins and lighting are all essential items to support and encourage the extended usage of Dublin parks, regardless of the day of the week and weather conditions. These were focal points of demand in terms of infrastructure from our respondents, along with the desire to see more catering facilities, in particular cafes (both temporary and permanent). Consideration should also be given for public/private collaborations where the investment for such infrastructures is justified; for example, privately operated cafe could be required to provide public toilet facilities and their maintenance.

## 8.3 Mobility and Accessibility

Unnecessary barriers (such as 'kissing gates') should be removed wherever possible to provide accessibility to less abled park users. The parks' footpaths and cycle paths should be accessible to all users. The most common reason for visiting urban parks is for walking with friends and family, walking of pets, walking whilst enjoying nature and walking for exercise and health benefits. Considering these findings, we recommend that significant attention is warranted to the width of paths, path coverings, associated infrastructure (lighting, seats, bins) and can clearly justify further development and investment. The usage of such paths must be assessed locally to decide the best approach in terms of catering to all activities. Consideration should be given to the shared usage of these paths whenever it is unfeasible or undesirable to segregate them for particular purposes.

#### 8.4. Changing Park Usage

The COVID-19 pandemic with its social distancing restrictions, lockdowns and change in Dublin citizen's work patterns saw significant changes to their park usage with almost half of respondents visiting a park daily. Nearly 7 out of every 10 respondents (68.4%) live within a 10-minute walk of a public park. We already know that proximity of parks to residential areas is directly related to the rate of visitation. We recommend that any future parks are situated within or as close as possible to residential areas. The COVID-19 pandemic with its social distancing restrictions, lockdowns and change in Dublin citizen's work patterns saw significant changes to their park usage with almost

During COVID-19, DCC parks have seen a steady increase of usage during workdays (Monday to Friday) and there was a noticeable increase in the time spent in Dublin parks during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 88.6% of respondents stated they intend to use the park as frequently after the COVID-19 pandemic. We therefore recommend that future research is required between 6 to 12 months post-cessation of COVID-19 restrictions to identify if this increased usage and increased time spent in parks is maintained, as it has significant implications for infrastructure supports.

#### 8.5 Barriers to Park Usage in the DCC Catchment Area

The lack of toilets in parks, perceived overcrowding of parks during a pandemic, dog fouling, lack of catering facilities and feeling unsafe in parks were all cited as common barriers to park usage. For example, respondents feel that poorly lit areas in parks makes them feel unsafe and acts as a barrier to their use of local parks. We recommend that the feasibility of increased investment in park infrastructure is seriously examined in light of the very significant increase in park usage and the growing understanding of the importance of urban parks to Dublin citizen's health and wellbeing.

## 8.6 Park Events' Promotion

Park events such as open-air markets, concerts, gardening festivals, pop up cinema and theatre events are popular with Dublin citizens for socialising. A targeted and unified approach combined with an increased effort to the promotion of park events and news through multiple communication channels is needed, as only 23.8% of respondents agreed that 'upcoming events and activities in my local park are well promoted' and only half (49.7%) of respondents have attended an event in a park. This unified approach for the promotion of park events must be undertaken through multiple communication channels, especially as 28.9% of respondents stated that they don't use online information resources to access information about park events. This would also address the different patterns of access to information about park event by age group, as different age cohorts use different online platforms as outlined in the report and half of the 75-84 age group that we surveyed don't use any online platforms.

## 8.7 Parks, Play and Families

The single most attractive element of parks for respondents with children was the presence of a playground. However, parents also acknowledged that parks assist with the health and wellbeing of their children and see urban parks as a means of letting their children enjoy the benefits of active pursuits in a natural environment. A wide variety of child activities and behaviours are facilitated within urban parks by creating the right conditions for informal and imaginative child-led play in the natural landscape.

## 8.8 Priorities of Residents for the Future of Parks within the DCC Catchment Area

We asked all survey respondents to identify and rank the priority areas which they believe should be the key priority for Dublin City Council moving forward. The most common request was for more landscaping (plants and trees), followed by better



facilities (toilets, seating, bins), more socialising initiatives, including more local events. We recommend that DCC work in partnership with local community groups to implement these priority areas identified by the park users.

8

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## Appendix A. Local Parks in DCC Catchment which Survey Respondents Discussed

Albert College Park	Galtymore Park	Mucky Lane Malahide road.
All Hallows Campus	Glasnevin Cemetery	Oscar Square
Belcamp Park	Grangegorman TUD Campus	Palmerston Park
Belgrave Square	Grattan Crescent Park	Pope John-Paul Park
Blessington Street Park	Great Western Park	Popintree Park
Bluebell park	Griffith Park	Ranelagh Gardens Park
Brickfield Park	Hampstead Park	Ringsend Park
Bull Island	Harold's Cross Park	Rockfield Park
Bunting field park	Herbert Park	Saint Anne's Park
Bushy Park	Herzog Park	Saint Kevin's Park
Capital Dock Park	Iveagh Gardens	Saint Patrick's Park
Coulty Park	Landsdowne Valley Park	Sandymount Green
Croydon Gardens	Laurel Lodge Green	Sandymount Strand
Darndale Park	Le Fanu Park	Sean Moore Park
Dartmouth Square	Linear Park	St. Audoen's Park
Dartry Park	Marino Park	Stannaway Park
Deer Park	Markievicz Park	Stardust Memorial Park
Diamond Park	Martin Savage Park	Sundrive Park
Drumcondra Park	Maypark	The Croppies Acre
Eammon Ceannt Park	Merrion Square Park	The Gardens- Royal Hospital Kilmainham
Eaton Square	Millenium Park	Tolka Park
Edenmore Park	Milltown Park	Violet Hill Park
Eileen McLoughlin Park	Mount Argus Park	Weaver Park
Ellenfield Park	Mount Bernard Park	William Pearse Park
Fairview Park	Mountjoy Square Park	
Father Collins Park		

