

People power in parks

Rethinking Parks



Introduction

• Introduction

Why people power in parks?

Parks Community UK

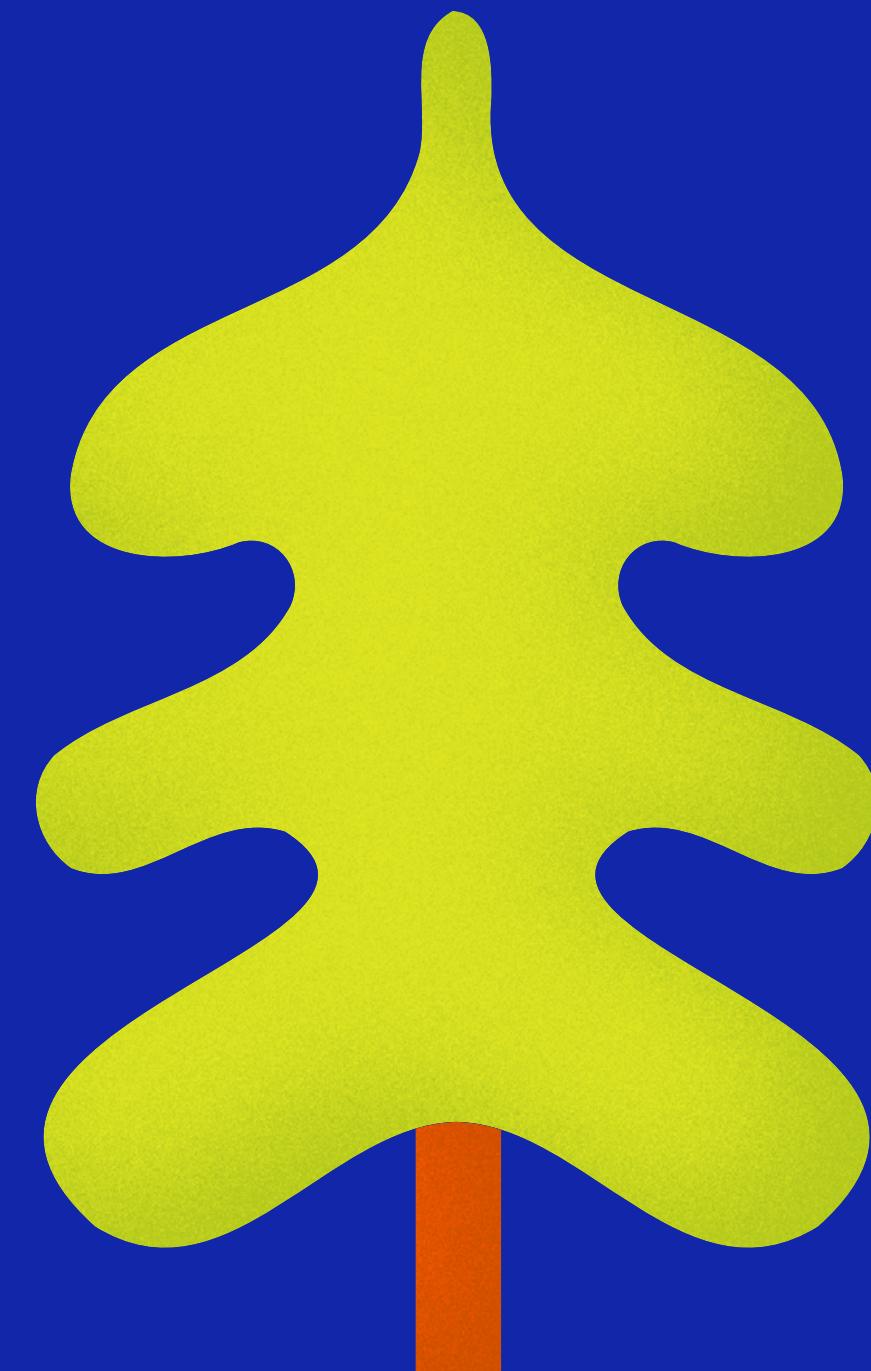
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Tips and tools

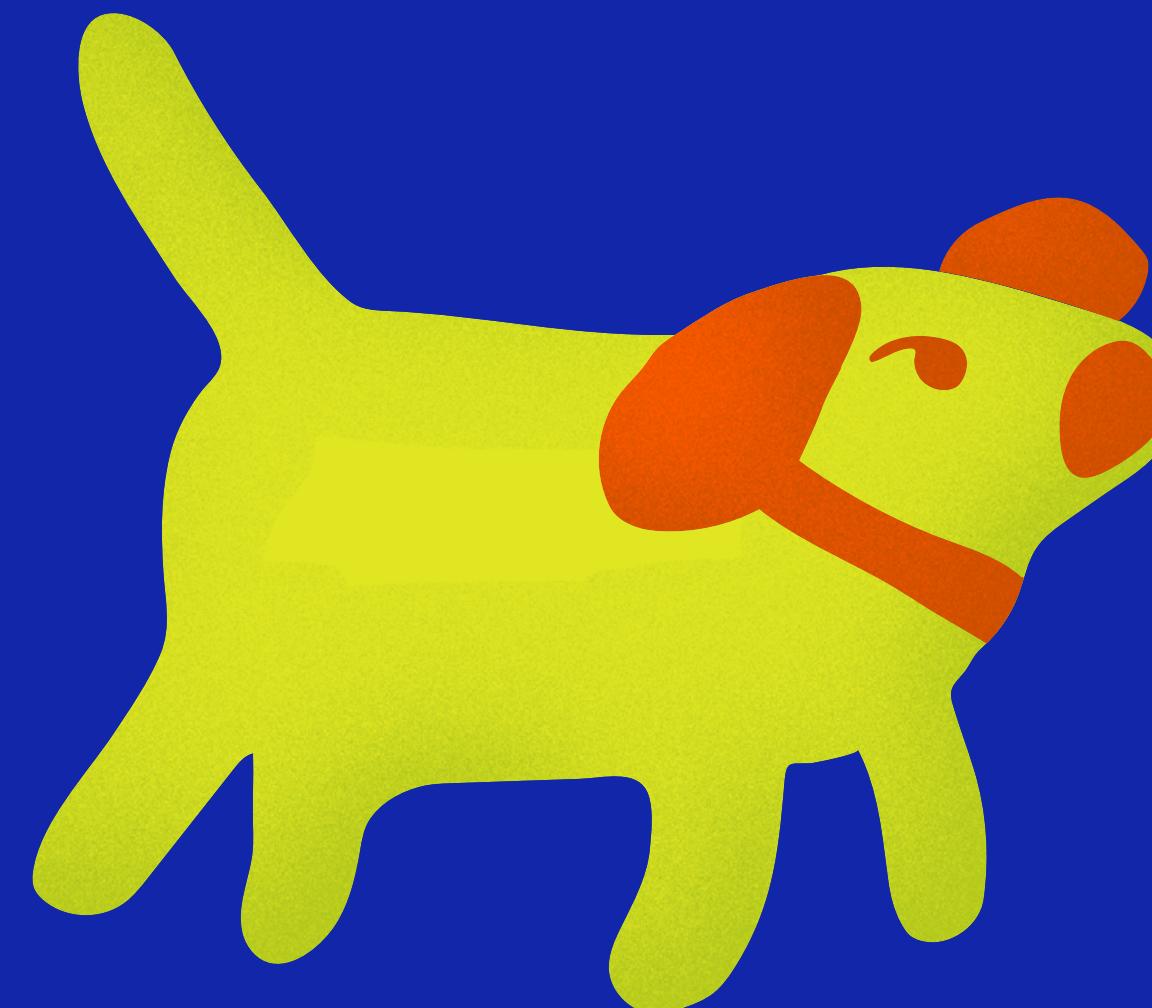
Public parks play an important role in people's lives. They are loved assets, valued for many reasons. But due to demand placed on local authorities' budgets to support statutory services such as social care, non-statutory services like parks are facing budget cuts and are at risk of decline.

People care about local parks and greenspaces that make our communities great places to live. As well as using our parks and greenspaces, many people support them in a variety of ways – through formal or informal volunteering, making donations and running campaigns to protect them when they are under threat. Actively engaging and involving communities can encourage increased use of parks and greenspaces, create a greater sense of belonging to a local area, whilst also enabling connections between people and local places.



There are a range of different ways that communities can get involved so that parks can be created 'by the people, for the people'. Of particular note is the growing movement of over 7,000 local 'Friends of Parks' groups throughout the UK, who play a whole host of roles, demonstrating the high levels of interest from communities in our parks and greenspaces.

In practice, though, community involvement can be complex and patchy. It requires careful design, otherwise it can be at risk of being tokenistic and frustrating for all involved. How much control and responsibility communities can and want to have is often debated, especially when parks are under increased financial pressure.



In this leaflet

In this leaflet, we will draw from the experience of three Rethinking Parks projects. One is a national project, Parks Community UK, which helps people shape ideas and decisions about their local parks. The other two projects, Performing Parks in Thurrock and Par Track in Cornwall, show local people taking more direct control of parks and greenspaces through models of stewardship or ownership. This leaflet outlines their experiences, some of the challenges they faced, their key lessons and sets out a framework to map the different forms that people power can take in parks.

Based on the three projects,
we will explore:

Key roles and activities
taken by communities



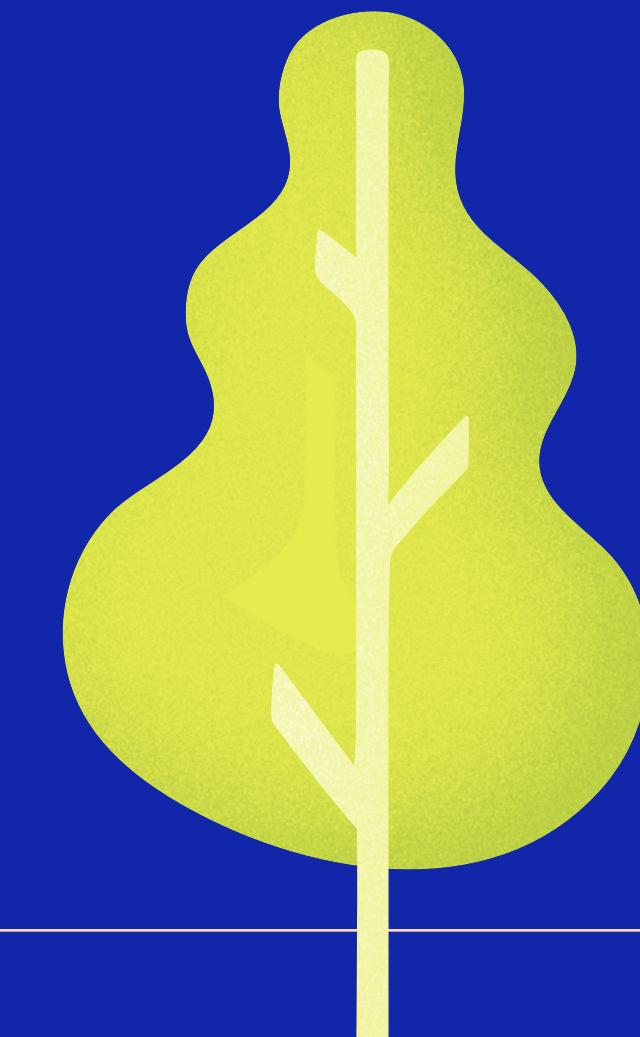
Relationships and
outreach activities



Skills and
resources needed



Assets and funding needed to
become financially sustainable



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Over the last 10 years much of Nesta's work has put people and communities at the heart of innovation, through a variety of people-powered approaches. We have supported a range of experimentations that demonstrate that the best public services are designed to be more open and collaborative, enabling more creative and active citizenship. We've seen how by bringing together public service professionals and citizens, better solutions can be created to build stronger communities, that enable healthier and happier lives.

We think this is particularly relevant for parks

Parks and greenspaces should be common spaces, freely accessible and inclusive. Involving people who use parks in decision-making helps them set the agenda on how best to serve the needs of the local community.

Tapping into the experience, knowledge and talent of the community can help design and deliver new approaches, enhancing a park's value to society and the natural environment.

People power in parks in action

In parks and greenspaces across the country, you will find a wide range of people-powered approaches, which often take the following (non-mutually exclusive and often overlapping) forms:

Reciprocal or informal help

This often involves mutual and reciprocal support ranging from acts of neighbourliness amongst peers such as taking each others' children to the park to informal litter clean ups and exercise groups. Sometimes an informal act such as picking up litter can be a first step towards volunteering.

Example in practice: during COVID-19 lockdown visitors to the Meadows in Edinburgh took on the watering of plants in the community garden following a request on Facebook.

Advocacy and activism

Championing a much loved greenspace can include organising events, producing promotional literature, lobbying for improvements or campaigning against closure, neglect or planned development.

Example in action: [Friends of Turn Moss](#) (Trafford, Greater Manchester) started as a successful community campaign to save a greenspace from development and has now established an excellent working relationship with the local authority and others in the community.

Formal volunteering

Formal volunteering might be through local people forming '[Friends of groups](#)', or directly organised by councils and regional or national charities. This could include working with employers to give back to the community through activities such as litter collection or tree planting.

Example in action: [Bristol City Council](#) and Bristol Parks Forum support park users to set up Friends groups, organise volunteer days in their biggest greenspaces, and run the [ParkWork](#) scheme.

Donating and sharing

Donating and sharing can range from organising crowdfunding appeals and regular financial contributions to ad-hoc donations of trees and park benches as well as offering skills and expertise for free.

Example in action: [Park foundations](#), are non-profit organisations that support parks across a wide geographical area such as a region or a city. They can increase opportunities for people to give to parks through organising fundraising activities, sponsorship and opportunities to help parks to remain free, open and accessible to the wider public.

Shaping ideas and decisions

To help shape ideas and improve decisions, it's important to involve park users and communities, develop partnerships between user groups and management and build support for changes and improvements.

Example in action: [Friends of Latchmere Rec](#) (Kingston upon Thames, London) worked with the whole community to create and build support for a park masterplan.

Community control

Community control is a spectrum of activities that can involve:

- User group control of various features or facilities (e.g. a woodland, bowling green or café).
- Empowerment of user groups as partners.
- Co-management of parks with a local authority.
- Transfer of park ownership to a community.

Example in action: [Friends of Hardie Park](#) (Thurrock, Essex) run a successful café using income generated and working with volunteers to undertake much of the day-to-day maintenance of the community park.

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Approach

Parks Community UK is a national project led by the Friends of Lordship Rec in London that, working closely with the National Federation of Parks and Greenspaces, aims to promote and grow community empowerment and co-management of public spaces.

Throughout the project, Parks Community UK has provided individual support and enabled peer learning between 10 Friends groups across London, Peterborough and Manchester to help them grow stronger, improve relationships with parks managers and achieve practical improvements to their parks and greenspaces.



By supporting these groups, Parks Community UK learned that:

- Friends groups generally need and welcome the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences with peers, and to feel part of a wider movement.
- Parks services are generally supportive in principle but do not always know how to work effectively with Friends groups and often lack resources to do so.
- Celebrating and publicising the difference these organisations are making helps them build support for their goals.
- Small nudges to adopt more effective ways of working, including sharing news and case studies of peers' success stories, helped groups build resilience and progress.

The peer learning and group development approach has been made available to the wider 'Friends of' movement through developing the Parks Community UK website and building simple online tools.

Friends of Turn Moss volunteers at work



The Save Turn Moss group campaigning to save a greenspace from development



Relationships

Parks Community UK's work is based on the principle that good relationships between Friends groups and landowners are critical to achieve the best outcomes for parks.

The main challenge identified was that many local authorities and Friends groups have ambivalent or ad hoc relationships, so that even in the same area, some groups have a good relationship with the council and some a poor one. A lot depends on officers' availability. A significant amount of work went into understanding how to create and nurture better relationships, helping both sides build their partnership. The main lessons are that:

- Friends groups usually understand who parks users are and how well their park is meeting the needs of the local community.
- Given the variability in relationships, local authorities need proactive policies, commitment and consistency to support community involvement and empowerment.
- Good relationships lead to more effective working within a site and with external partners.
- People can't expect to create strong relationships overnight. These take time and need to be built on common interests and concerns rather than differences, whilst respecting each others' priorities.



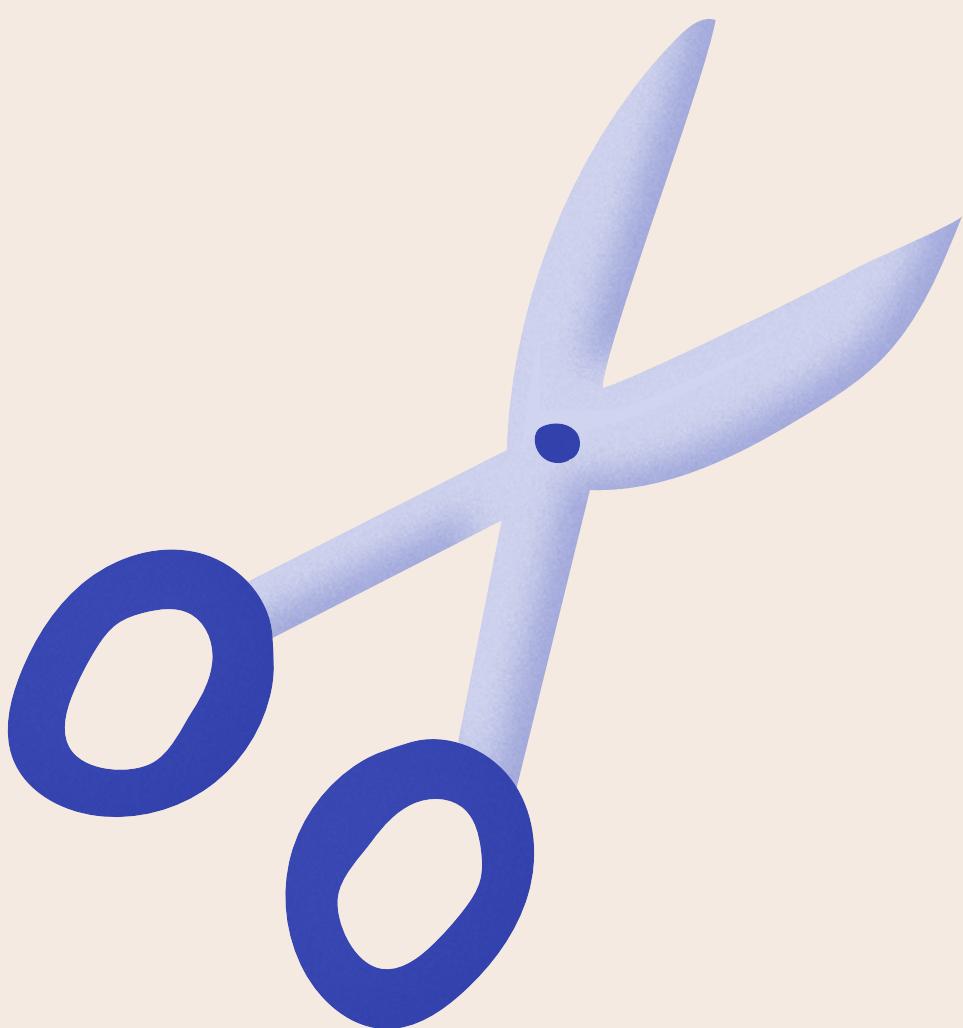
Skills

Throughout the project, many local groups' challenges were observed, from organisational development to realisation of long-term vision. In particular:

- Friends groups usually have access to a wide range of skills amongst their members in the wider community, but these need to be sought and discovered, and the group needs to be open and inclusive.
- It can be very challenging for what are entirely volunteer-based organisations to make full use of these skills.

At the start of the project, groups completed an in-depth survey to identify their strengths and development needs, and were provided with one-on-one support to overcome the identified challenges through the development of an action plan.

The project also organised a number of workshops to allow groups to share their experiences and support each other.



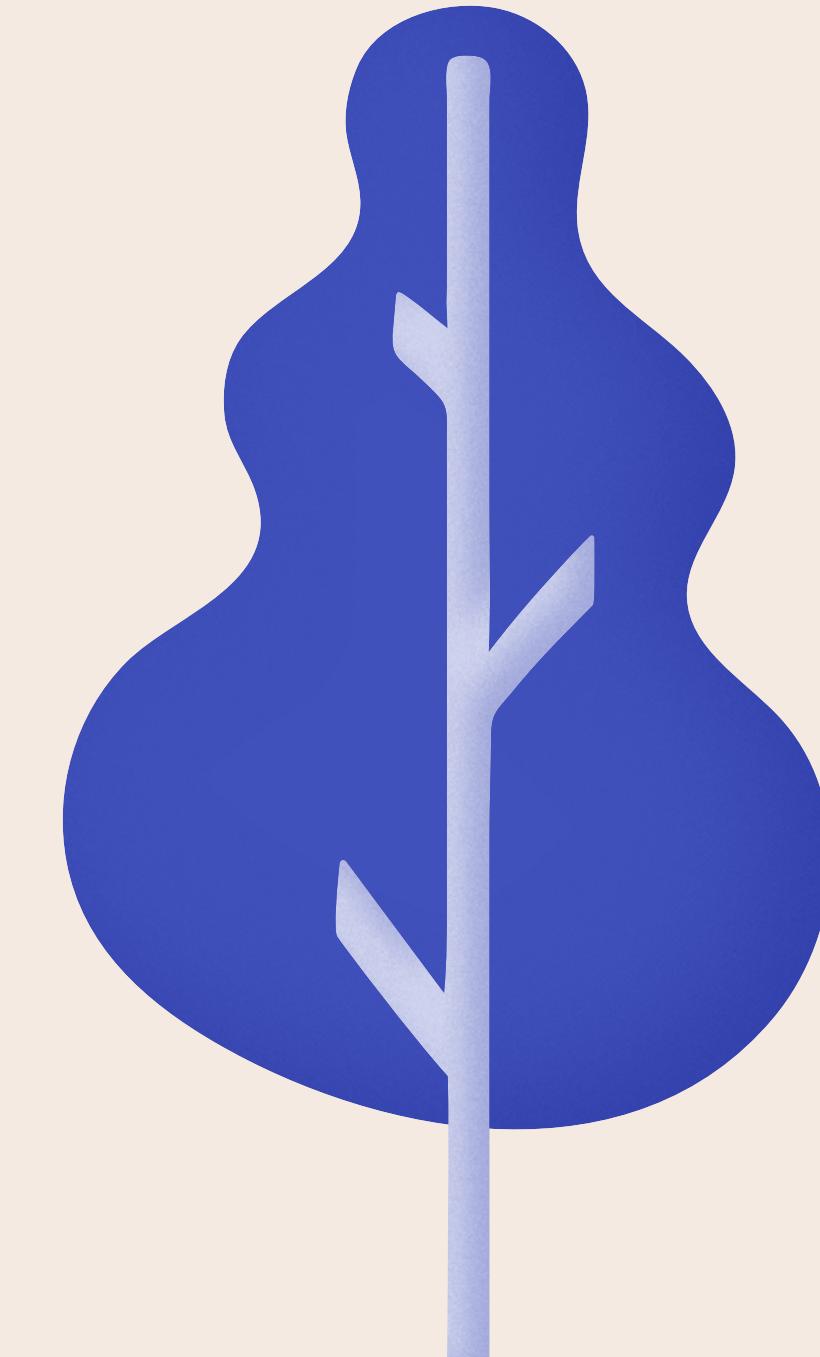
To reach a wider audience than the 10 participating groups, Parks Community UK developed an online 'one stop resource' with case studies, practical 'how to' guides on how to set up a Friends group, establish partnerships and organise events and activities. The site is also home to a prototype 'Better Friends strength-checker' tool, enabling all Friends groups to assess themselves and gain insight as to how they can grow their strengths and effectiveness.

Funding and assets

Working with many Friends groups highlighted the great variation in local sites, issues and concerns, as well as the way each group organise their skills base and resources.

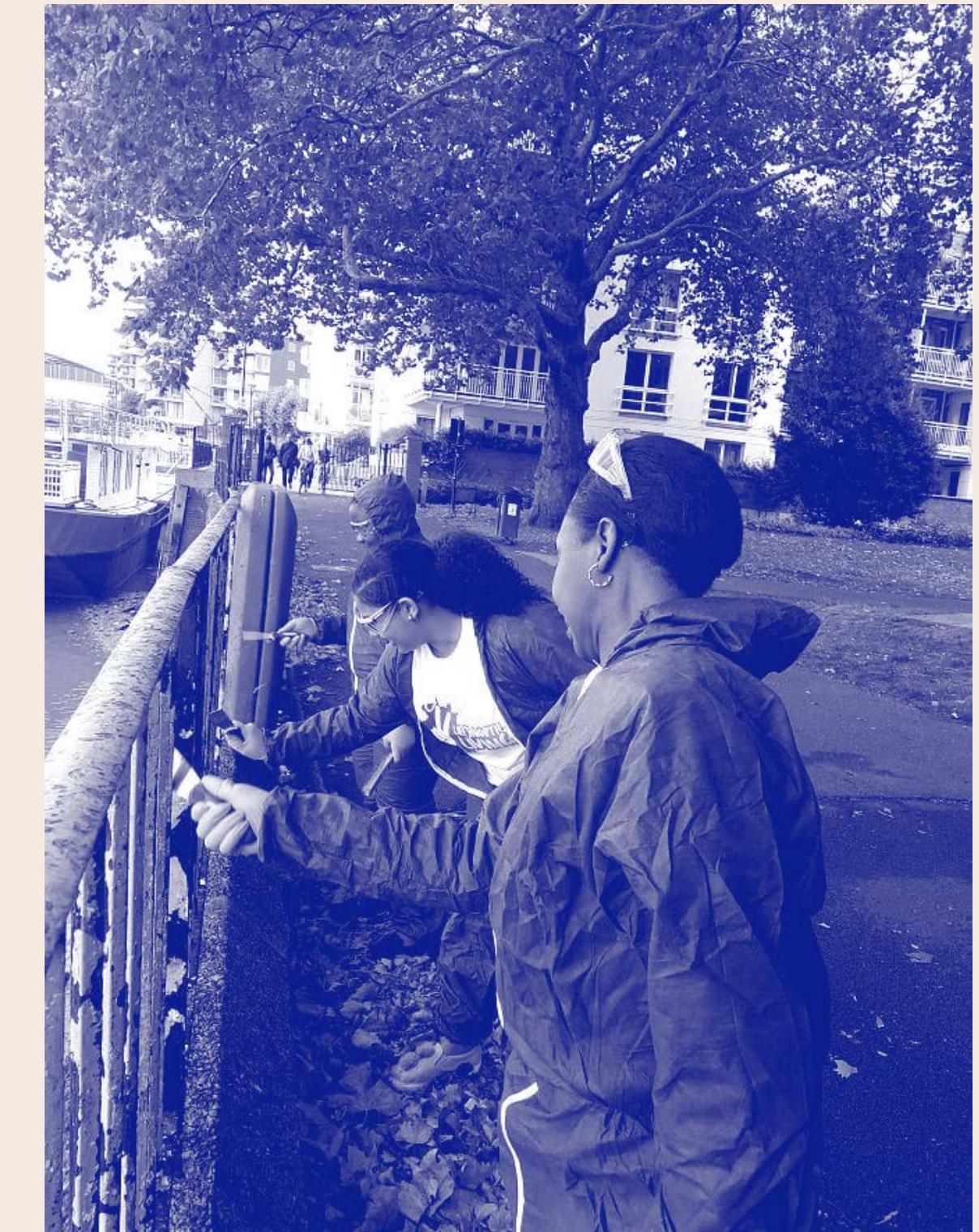
This variation is both a strength and a weakness. They might run projects and facilities and be actively applying for grants and looking out for alternative ways of funding activities and improvements. There is a no 'one size fits all' model here, although all share some common themes and challenges:

- Community development, peer learning, and networking require financial and time commitments, despite limited financial return.
- A Friends group's own membership and their local relationships are their biggest asset. However, peer-to-peer networking between and among groups – including the development of local Friends of Parks Forums, working in partnership with their local authorities – is essential for swapping news and best practices and for picking up ideas and inspiration.



- Although there are many resources and tools available for groups at different stages of development, these need to be made easily available and accessible beyond the individual groups or local network to broader learning opportunities. A coordinating role, such as the one being developed by [Parks Community UK](#) and the [National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces \(NFPGS\)](#), with additional signposting to other sources of support, such as [Locality](#), [myCommunity](#), and [Fields In Trust](#), is therefore very important to support groups and avoid reinventing the wheel.

Friends of Wandsworth Park



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Hardie Park in Stanford-le-Hope, Thurrock has been transformed from a forgotten and neglected local greenspace to a thriving community hub. This was possible thanks to local people who, coming together as Friends of Hardie Park, took responsibility for much of the running of the park on a day-to-day basis.

The key component of Hardie Park is the café, run as a social enterprise, it provides a space for the local community to come together. The income generated by the café is used to improve and better maintain the park, while Thurrock Council continues to undertake certain tasks for all parks such as grass cutting.

Through the project Performing Parks, Friends of Hardie Park helped five other parks in Thurrock working to adopt a management approach based on community stewardship and entrepreneurship.



Relationships

It takes good ties with local authorities ...

Thurrock Council is a key partner in the **Performing Parks** project. The aim has been to create the right conditions for a mutually beneficial relationship between parks groups and the council. This would give community groups the freedom to take initiatives, while simultaneously balancing risks and capacity for parks managers.

All five parks involved in the project are based within the same local authority, but in different towns. Some have good relationships with the council and some are more challenging. The groups are:

- Aveley and Kenningtons Parks
- Bonnygate Park, South Ockendon
- The Daisy Field, Tilbury
- Gobions Park, East Tilbury
- Grays Beach Park, Grays



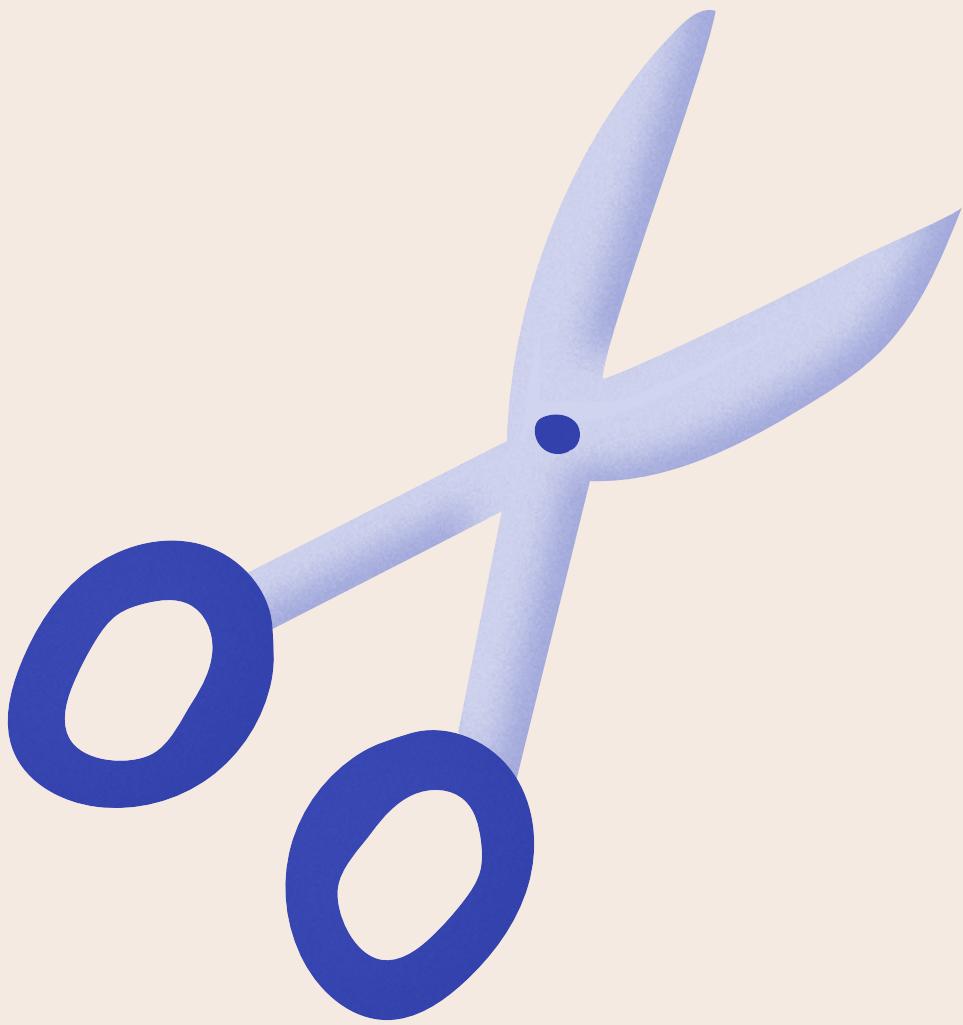
Volunteers from the participating parks came together to share their challenges and successes

... and volunteers

The importance of existing networks is key: initially, the Friends of Hardie Park was ran by a small group of regular volunteers and their friends and family. As operations expanded and volunteer opportunities became marketed, other community members started getting involved. A key mechanism for building the relationship between the groups and the council has been to establish the [Friends of Thurrock Parks](#), a common feature in many other parts of the country, which did not exist in Thurrock, to act as collective voice and forum for engaging all parks groups in the borough.

"I have so missed volunteering at the café in the park during lockdown. My husband was in a care home for the past few years and sadly died earlier this year. I joined Hardie Park so that I could meet new people and feel like I was contributing, even though I am long retired. The people I have met have become my very good friends and are now my main support network. I find that care and consideration are two attributes volunteers display and I have benefited enormously from these especially during the lockdown. I can't wait until we can get back to work!"

Lyn, volunteer at Hardie Park



The story of Hardie Park shows that given the right conditions and leadership, local residents can do tremendous things for their local communities and environment. However, every volunteer and community group has different skills and experiences, which will affect their ability to adopt a 'model' that worked elsewhere.

A flexible approach is therefore needed to ensure everyone can contribute. For example Friends of Hardie Park has members adept in business skills, which has helped to run a sustainable enterprise whilst both serving and receiving support from the local community. But Grays Beach Park, realising they don't have these skills in-house, decided to work with a third-party café operator. Other desirable skills are events organisation, design, communication and horticulture experience.

There are other skills that are harder to learn, which relate to an entrepreneurial 'mindset', a positive attitude and vision about what can be achieved. While the Friends of Hardie Park have shared their story and top tips, they also partnered with Thurrock Council to commission the School for Social Entrepreneurs to run local skills programmes for the five groups and other members of the community.

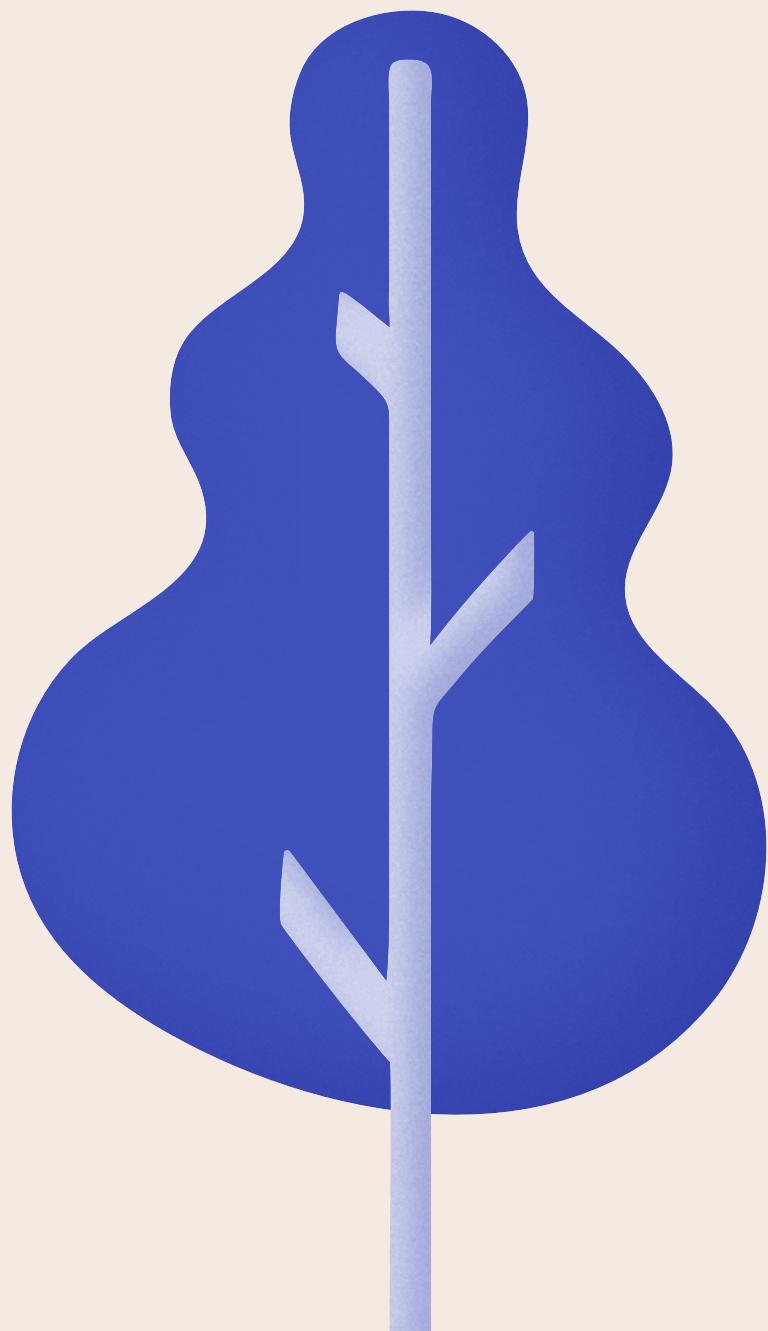
While feedback from the course has been positive for the participants, the longer term impact on the success is unknown.

Funding and assets

Managing parks and greenspaces can seem daunting. While significant financial investment is needed, the **Performing Parks'** approach also relies on skills, resources and determination of the community, together with an inventive mindset. Parks managers might be uncomfortable when the Friends of Hardie Park say that 'Often the tools the local community has are laying around in sheds at home and can get the job done', but they suggest:

- Capitalise on people's resourcefulness: 'As they say, it's often not about what you know, it's who you know'. Having people who can call in favours can save a small fortune.
- Look at the opportunities that each park offers in terms of income generation, e.g. managing a café or organising events.

The limitation is that mentoring and skills support for local groups requires funding, in this case it was possible thanks to the Rethinking Parks programme.



"When we wanted to build a hub in Hardie Park, we knew that getting funding for a building was going to be difficult and take a long time. Instead, we approached a local company to ask about

a seemingly disused pre-fab building. Lo and behold, they were only too happy to donate the thing to our cause and get it off their land."

Rob Groves, Performing Parks/Friends of Hardie Park

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Par Track was an underutilised athletics track at risk of closure. Cornwall Council agreed to transfer ownership to a community benefit society, based on a business plan created by a group of local volunteers.

Community ownership and management has not only saved the athletic track from closure, but revived it through adding facilities, such as a café, community gym, micro library, pump track and green trail. The space hosts a wider range of activities including cycling, school activity days and exercise classes, available 'on prescription' from a neighbouring GP practice.

Their aim is not only to make the track financially viable in the future and maintain it for the long term, but also to continuously improve it by turning it into a greenspace that benefits the whole community through opportunities for fitness, wellbeing and social interaction.



Relationships

As it didn't fit the mould of a conventional leisure centre facility, this once local council-owned and underutilised athletics track, was left out of the tender package for the county's leisure centres, when the council divested itself of these assets. Rather than see it sold for housing development, a local group took it over and transformed it in a community-operated public space, through the creation of a charitable community benefit society, and a 125 year lease to steward, and operate, the site. While the local authority has 'stepped away' in some respects, in reality the transfer was only possible because the team secured the council's support and ongoing commitment to working in partnership. They also built on existing relationships and previous programmes such as [Big Local](#).

Par Track engaged the wider community and potential funders through setting out a reimagined space, working with a local design studio to create visualisations of the proposed physical changes to the site including new and improved facilities. They contacted potential providers and partners for new activities, while maintaining a good relationship with the Newquay and Par Athletics Club as valued existing users. The directors adapted their plans to changing local priorities, e.g. hosting a self-service micro library which also attracts other users to the site.



Par Track's new green trail and pump track

The partnership with the neighbouring GP practice is a key element of the project. They worked with clinicians to pilot a social prescribing programme that supported 50 local residents to improve their health through activities at Par Track. Building this relationship with an unfamiliar sector, such as healthcare, takes time. Directors were not afraid to change and adapt the approach, yielding beneficial results and support from the GP practice, which has agreed to fund the continuation of the social prescribing service.

The track is being used for a wider range of activities



Skills

Par Track's early success has been in part due to the professional skills of the 11 volunteer directors, in areas such as accounting, marketing and education. Ten full or part-time staff bring expertise and experience in managing the café, facilities and exercise programmes. While they've been able to rely on local people to help with the café and library, recruitment for specialist roles for new activities such as social prescribing has been challenging.

Volunteer recruitment should not be underestimated either, as it requires continued engagement in the community and requests for help. Par Track include a regular feature in their community newsletter on areas where they are struggling and need more help from local people.

The scale of ambition and ongoing nature of running a community business has placed big demands on the core volunteers. There are plans to appoint a full time general manager to provide leadership and management while investing in training and development for volunteer directors.

Par Track have valued external challenges and mentoring, including support on business planning, even in situations where volunteers have related professional backgrounds.



Funding and assets

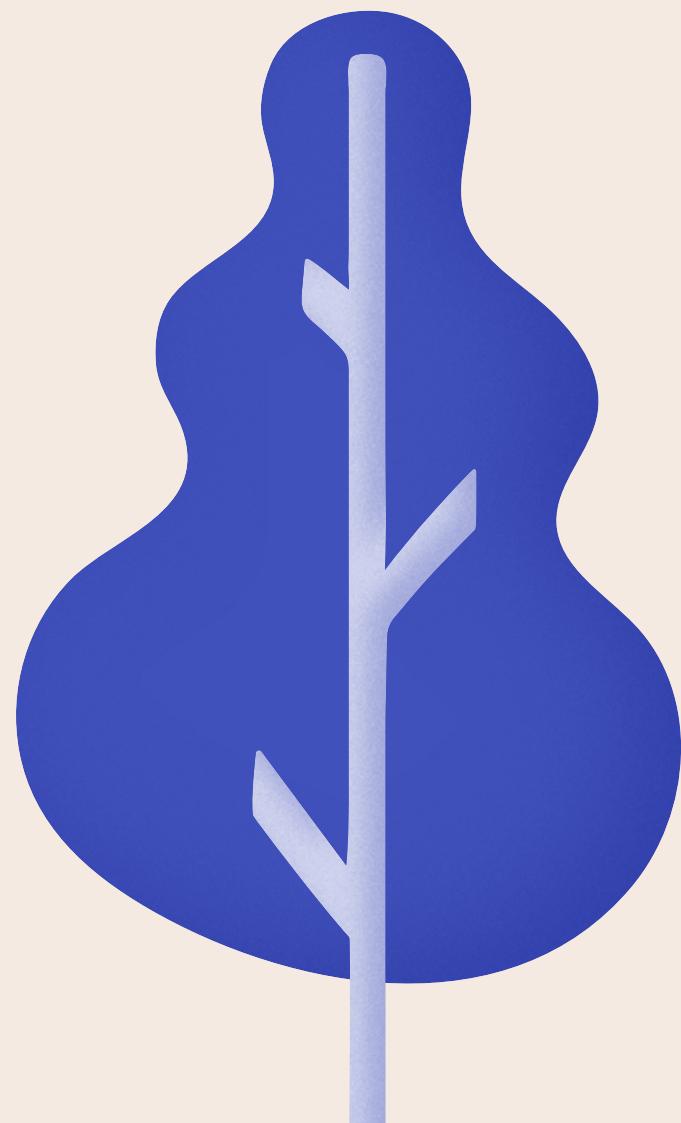
Although **Par Track** attracted significant grant funding to go further and cover long-term investment in renewing facilities, particularly the athletics track, the business needs to generate a surplus or raise additional funds. Although they found it challenging to get the wider community to understand why many of the facilities on the site require fees, even at the early stages of trading, they have demonstrated an ability to generate a good income. The café and community gym also generate income, in line with projections to cover core costs. Nearly 300 members have been recruited to the gym and various fitness activities.

While more needs to be done to make the model resilient, the diversity of income streams has helped, as has the commitment of volunteers, local support and the focus on generating social benefits from every part of the space.

Par Track planned to launch a community share offer to fund early investment in the site. This would both raise funds and give local people a stake in future investment in maintaining the site. In practice, this was not pursued in the first few years as initial investment was secured through grants, with the directors having limited capacity to deliver both funding strategies at the same time.



The refurbished pavilion brings together a cafe, library and community group in a green setting



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Learn from the innovators

"As a former local authority manager, I know that a strong partnership with communities can bring huge value to parks and greenspaces. Building that relationship takes patience, effort and openness on both sides."

Paul Ely from Parks Community UK

"Say 'yes' as often as you can. We were approached by a group of gardeners who wanted to plant flowers and a petanque club, who needed a terrain to play on. Neither of these things were in our immediate plan, but the momentum that the community brought with their desires meant things happened quickly and were sustainable."

Rob Groves from Performing Parks

"Our success will lie in our whole community understanding that this wonderful park belongs to us all, and that we all have a say in how it is run and what it can offer. As a community business, we have to offer good facilities and activities, and be always inviting people to use the site, to get involved in stewarding it too."

Collin Harker from Par Track



- [Parks Community UK](#)
- [National Federation of Parks and Greenspaces](#)
- [Performing Parks: It's not theirs, it's ours](#)
Learn from Friends of Hardie Park's radical approach to community stewardship.
- [My Community](#)
- [Friends of Hardie Park](#)
- [Friends of Lordship Rec](#)
- [Par Track](#)
- [Better Friends strength checker](#)
Parks Community UK has developed an online tool based on the one-to-one and peer support offered to participating groups. It helps Friends groups reflect on their:
 - Organisation and structure
 - Meetings and activities
 - Inclusiveness and partnerships
 - Effectiveness and ambition

Rethinking Parks is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Nesta. It supports innovative ways of managing and financing the UK's public parks to make sure they are sustainable and are run more impactfully for their local communities.