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Croydon Talks Parks engagement – Summary report

Background

Croydon has 127 parks and green spaces, alongside 17 allotment sites. They are loved and much used by their local communities and are strategically important to the ecology, health and wellbeing of the Borough. The Council's vision for its parks and green spaces is to make sure that these important community assets are maintained for future generations to enjoy.

An important part of achieving this vision is to better understand how people are using Croydon parks and green spaces at the moment, what they value about these, and how they think parks could be improved to help them reach their full potential. The Council therefore launched the 'Croydon Talks Parks' engagement from August – October 2016 to help get this understanding. This borough-wide engagement was aimed at anyone who uses or would like to use Croydon's parks or green spaces. The Council was very keen to get views on the following themes:

- how people use Croydon parks and green spaces
- what parks could offer to provide an exciting day out for people of all ages
- how parks could be used to encourage people to have healthier lifestyles
- how people could be encouraged to enjoy the environmental benefits that parks offer
- how parks could be used as a way of raising money
- how people could be encouraged to get more involved in the activities that take place in their parks including shaping and even taking over the management of assets in parks where they want to do so.

This report provides a summary of the findings from this engagement.

Who took part?

People were encouraged to have their say on these issues in a number of ways including:

- **Online survey** – this could be accessed through the Council's website and through the Get Involved platform. The survey contained a number of open-ended questions to give people the chance to express their views in their own words. The survey link was widely publicised by the Council in local media, social media, in Council buildings and on banners in Croydon's parks.
- **Face-to-face surveys** – this was aimed at park users. Towards the end of the engagement, the field team targeted areas where there had been lower survey responses to ensure everyone in the borough had been given the opportunity to have their say. To allow the surveys to be carried out with as little disruption to respondents' time as possible, the questions were mostly closed or multiple-choice with the option of people expanding on their answers if they wanted to.
- **Stakeholder meetings** – four stakeholder meetings were held with Friends of Parks groups, Allotment Societies, community groups and others who have an active role or interest in Croydon's parks and open spaces. Each meeting discussed a separate theme: these were 'an exciting day out'; 'promoting health and wellbeing'; 'making our parks greener and the role of the community in parks management'; and 'making it pay'
- **Written feedback** – some people and organisations also provided written feedback by e-mail or post.



By the end of the engagement, 1457 responses had been received through the following response channels:

Table 1: Number of responses received

Engagement channel	Number of responses
Online survey	1125
Face-to-face survey	325
Stakeholder group meetings	4
Written submissions	3
Total number of responses	1457

What did they tell us?

A summary of the key issues that people raised in the online and face-to-face surveys are described by theme. (NB: Not everybody answered every question so totals in graphs and tables may vary).

How parks and green spaces are used

Table 2 shows how often people said they visited Croydon's parks or green spaces. Around three in four respondents (76%) say they use parks at least once a week.

Table 2: How often do you use your parks and green spaces? (% and actual shown)

How often do you visit Croydon's parks or green spaces?	Online survey self-selecting public % (actual)	Face-to-face survey of people in / around parks % (actual)	Combined number of responses % (actual)
Daily	14% (157)	36% (112)	19% (269)
4-6 times a week	17% (188)	13% (39)	16% (227)
2-3 times a week	25% (277)	19% (58)	24% (335)
Weekly	19% (211)	9% (27)	17% (238)
Several times a month	11% (118)	6% (18)	9% (136)
Once or twice a month	10% (113)	10% (31)	10% (144)
I do not use Croydon's parks	2% (19)	8% (25)	3% (44)
Other	3% (31)	N/A	2% (31)
Total number of responses	1114	310	1424

When asked what they used Croydon parks for, the top three reasons given by respondents of both surveys were:

- Walking
- Get some fresh air
- Get some exercise



People were also asked what would encourage them to visit Croydon’s parks and green spaces more often. The top three reasons were similar for all respondents: feeling safe there; having better facilities for young children and families and having

more organised events / things to do in parks. However, as table 3 shows there were differences in priorities between the respondents. These are shown below:

Table 3: What would encourage you to go to Croydon’s parks or green spaces more?

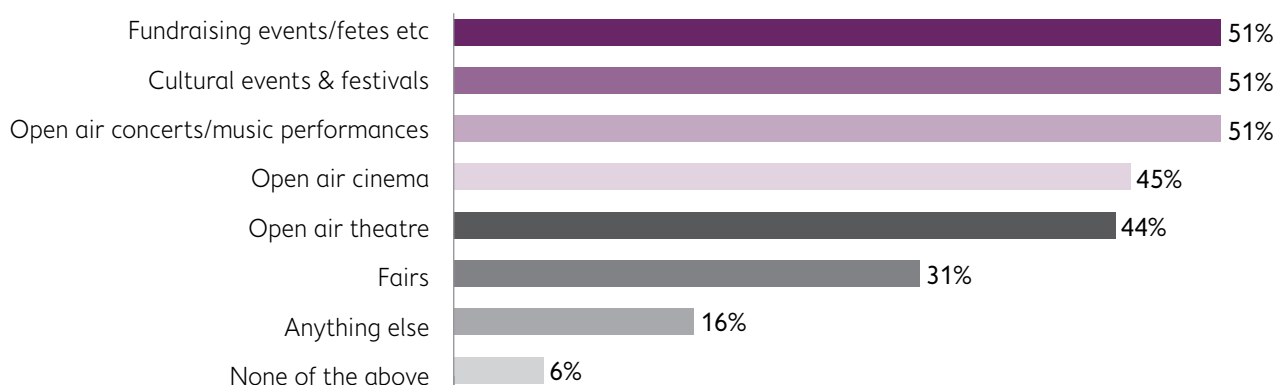
What would encourage you to go to Croydon’s parks or green spaces more? (More than one option could be chosen)	
Top five reasons (online survey)	Top five reasons (face-to –face survey)
Feeling safe there (41%)	Better facilities for young children and families (32%)
Better facilities for young children and families (38%)	More organised things to do (26%)
More things to do in the park (37%)	Feeling safer (22%)
Having the time (30%)	Having more free time (19%)
Living or working closer to a park (19%)	More toilets (12%)
Base number of responses: 1125	Base number of responses: 325

An exciting day out

People were asked what type of events or activities they would like to see more of in their parks. Face to face survey respondents were given options to choose from. Their answers are shown in Figure 1. More fundraising events / fetes, festivals and cultural events and open air music events were the most popular items chosen.

Online survey respondents were invited to give feedback in their own words. 841 comments were made. The most common theme raised was the need for more organised cultural and sporting events for families. This also included the need for more activities for children and young people, especially in the holidays.

Figure 1: What type of events or activities would you like to see more of? (Tick all that apply)
(Percentage response from a base of 325)





This was an issue discussed at a stakeholder meeting. There was agreement that there were already some good cultural activities and events already taking place in parks including festivals, heritage walks and fetes but that more could be done to promote them more widely across the borough. There was also a strong view that one of the biggest barriers to people attending organised events was a lack of basic facilities such as toilets. The group also strongly felt that there was more that the Council could do in partnership with ‘Friends of’ groups and other community groups to improve the cultural offer in parks. They felt the Council could have a key role in enabling local groups to organise activities themselves by supporting them in the promotion and marketing of events but also by centrally brokering access to expertise, funding and practical items (e.g. tables, mobile toilets, etc.) with other groups in different parks / neighbourhoods.

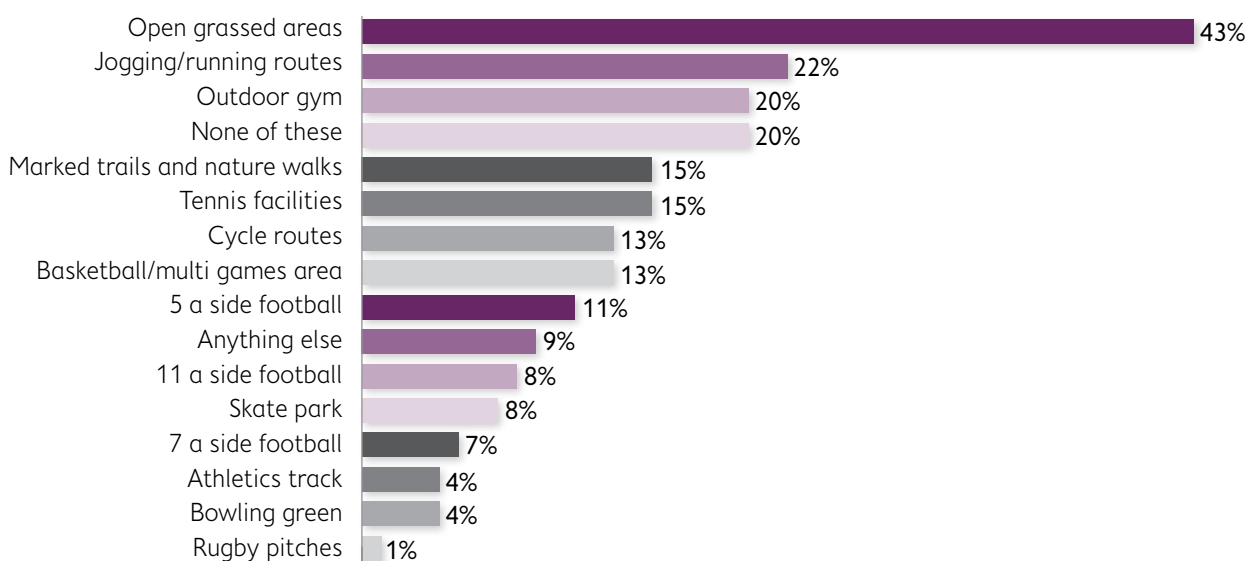
Getting more active

People were asked to identify what currently encourages them to be physically active in Croydon’s parks. Face to face survey respondents were given options to choose from. Their answers are shown in Figure 2. The most popular feature of parks mentioned was open green areas.

809 online survey respondents commented on this. The most common theme raised by them was the opportunity for walking that the green spaces and other features in Croydon’s parks provided. Other features included gardens, wildlife, dedicated walking routes and planned activities such as Nordic walking and others that are part of Croydon’s Walking for Health scheme.

Outdoor gyms in a range of parks across the borough were also mentioned by many as features that encouraged them to be more active.

Figure 2: What do you use/have you used in a Croydon park or open space that enables you to be physically active? (Percentage response from a base of 325)





People were also asked to describe what makes them more active. Face-to-face respondents felt that improving the provision of current sports facilities was important as were more organised activities. Many also felt that access to information about what sports activities currently existed would also be helpful (see Figure 3).

727 online survey respondents replied to this question. The most common barrier to being active raised by them was poor maintenance of parks. Many felt that if paths and green spaces were clean, not in poor condition and regularly maintained, they would be more likely to walk or run on them. Other factors raised that might encourage people to be more active was better access to exercise equipment and outdoor gyms as well as having more organised sports classes / activities in parks (including walking, jogging, cycling and dancing).

This was an issue discussed at a stakeholder meeting. There was agreement that provision of well-maintained sporting facilities including walking and cycling paths was mixed across Croydon parks. There was also agreement that many people did not know what was provided in their local parks. It was felt that the solution was not necessarily to make sure that every park offered the same access to healthy activities – for example some of Croydon’s parks that are admired for wildlife or nature might be spoiled by the addition of an outdoor gym. What participants felt should happen is that access to healthy activities and facilities such as outdoor gyms should be provided in all areas of the borough (but not necessarily all the parks); that existing facilities should all meet minimum quality standards; and that all sports facilities and health activities that take place in parks should be widely promoted.

Figure 3: What would encourage you to become more active in parks?



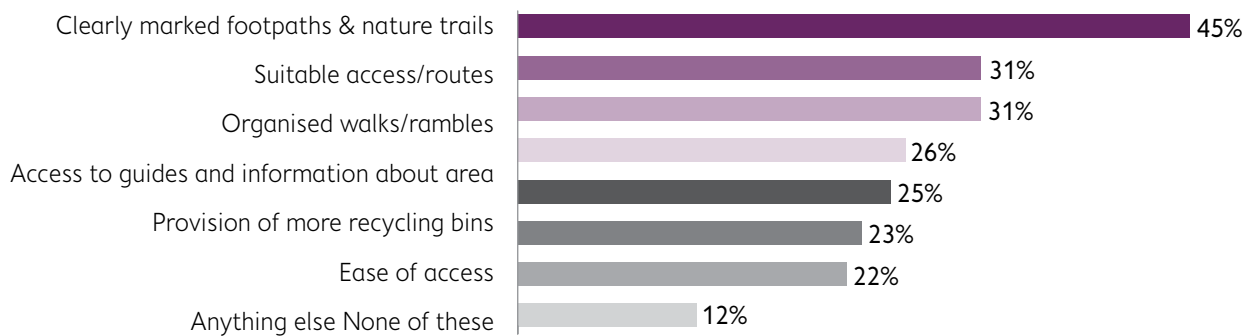


Closer to nature

People were asked what would encourage them to spend more time in natural areas such as local parks and woodlands. Face to face survey respondents were given options to choose from. Their answers are shown in Figure 4. Clearly marked footpaths and natural trails with information at points of interest was the most popular response. This was followed by having suitable access / routes for people with disabilities or parents with buggies and having more organised walks / rambles.

The most common issue raised by people who took part on the online survey (764 made comments), was the need for more organised walks and activities such as community clean-ups. Many also felt that there should be better communication and information about nature based events, activities and locations within parks in Croydon, particularly nature reserves such as South Norwood Country Park and Selsdon Wood. Another issue raised by many was the need to keep parks clean and well-maintained to make them more attractive and safe for people to visit.

Figure 4: What would encourage you to spend more time in the natural areas on your doorstep, such as local parks and woodlands? (Percentage response from a base of 325)





Face-to-face survey respondents were asked what they thought the priorities should be now to support nature and wildlife in parks and green spaces for years to come. Their top priorities were:

- provide educational opportunities and outdoor learning for people of all ages, to improve understanding of the natural world (48%)
- arrange community clean up days for local parks and open spaces (45%)
- more nesting boxes and bug huts (35%)
- encourage a broad range of plants and wild animals in local green spaces (33%)

[NB: These responses are from a base of 325 and respondents were allowed to tick up to three pre-defined priorities.]

699 online survey respondents replied to this question. They felt that one of the best things that could be done now to support nature and wildlife in parks in the future was ensuring parks were maintained and managed properly – this included the need to provide more bins and to take tough action on those who littered; as well as to have strategies to have dedicated spaces or conservation areas to protect and encourage the development of more plant and wildlife in Croydon’s parks, woodland areas and meadows.

Another common theme was the need for the Council to support and encourage more community involvement. Many praised the efforts that local volunteers currently went to, to make sure their parks were places that everyone could be proud of and they felt that this should be extended so that there were the equivalent of ‘Friends of’ groups in every park.

Participants at a stakeholder meeting that discussed this issue, felt that the best thing the Council could do to encourage more people to enjoy the nature on their doorstep was to proactively promote what existed in Croydon’s parks and open spaces. Allotments were raised as a case in point – many residents are not aware what allotments exist in the borough and how to join if they wanted to. There was not a central point of up-to-date information about allotment spaces. Many felt the Council could host an online ‘hub’ with key information that could act as a ‘one-stop shop’ for residents to access everything they need to know about what is offered in Croydon’s parks and open spaces (from allotments to community events).



Making it pay

People were asked to give ideas about how parks could be used to generate income. Face to face survey respondents were given options to choose from. Their answers are shown in Table 4. Encouraging sports and other providers to use parks was the most popular idea supported. This was closely followed by hosting events in parks, encouraging sponsorship and better promotion of activities that take place in parks and open spaces already.

Online survey respondents were asked what they thought of the following ideas and whether they could think of any other ways of generating income in Croydon’s parks and open spaces (718 made comments):

- Hosting more events in our parks
- Looking at sponsorship opportunities from Croydon businesses
- Encouraging more sports league and activity providers to use our parks as bases

Table 4: Ideas to generate income from parks (percentage response)

How do you think we could make some of our parks more efficient or even generate income from our parks?	TOTAL
Encourage greater use of parks for sports and other activities through local sports clubs, voluntary sector and local enterprise	46%
Increase the type and number of events held in local parks	43%
Invite businesses / shops etc. to sponsor local parks and open spaces	40%
Improve the way we promote activities and events in parks and open spaces	39%
Make it easier to book and pay for tickets to events, sports facilities etc.	27%
Anything else? (Please specify)	18%
None of the above	6%
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONSES	325 (10) 0%

People were on the whole responsive to these ideas and many suggested a range of community, arts, music and other events that could be hosted (at full or subsidised ticket rates) to raise money. There were a number of concerns raised too, though mainly about the negative impact more events would have on parks (especially around cleanliness) while a small number of others did not feel that parks should be used to generate income.

At a stakeholder meeting on this issue, there was consensus that there was the potential to expand commercial activity in Croydon’s parks and green spaces. They felt that improving the commercial

offer by having more festivals, introducing open air theatres and cinemas, connecting allotments and community gardens with local food retailers, and so on, would also improve the Croydon ‘brand’ and encourage more people to visit the area. They felt the Council could support this in a number of ways, including improving communication channels; having a ‘go-to’ person at the Council that provides advice for conducting business activities in parks since the current process for hiring space and making sure events are run in compliance with the law is very complex.



Getting more involved

People were asked for ideas about getting people involved in shaping and improving parks. Face to face survey respondents were asked whether they would be interested in getting more involved in this: 40% of the 325 respondents said they would be interested and over half said they would not be (53%). Of those who said they would be, they were asked in what ways they might want to get involved. Their answers are shown in Figure 5. Getting involved in litter picking and parks maintenance was the most popular activity mentioned. This was followed by planting new trees.

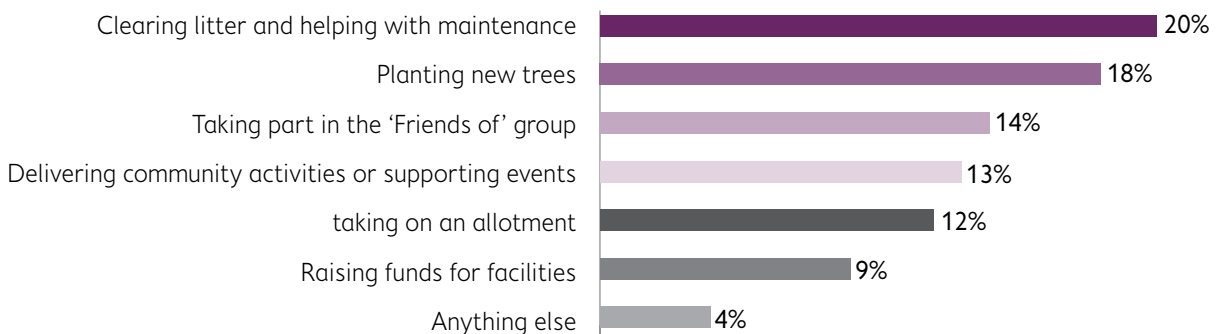
Online survey respondents were asked whether they thought 'growing food; planting trees; clearing litter; raising funds for new playgrounds; and joining 'Friends of' groups' were good ways of getting involved in shaping and improving parks and whether they had any ideas of their own. They were also asked if they would be interested in getting more involved. 463 people responded to this question.

Many thought that these were good suggestions. Some other ways of getting involved that were mentioned included promoting activities through social media networks and getting involved in activities that also involved their children.

Of those who explicitly indicated whether they would be interested in getting more involved, there was a mixed response. A small number said they would and a similar number said they would not at this time or because they were already involved in 'Friends of' groups or with litter-picking.

People were also asked in both surveys if they would be interested in helping to organise community events or other activities in parks. There were fewer people who were keen to take on these roles across both surveys.

Figure 5: How could we get you involved in shaping and improving parks?
(Percentage response)



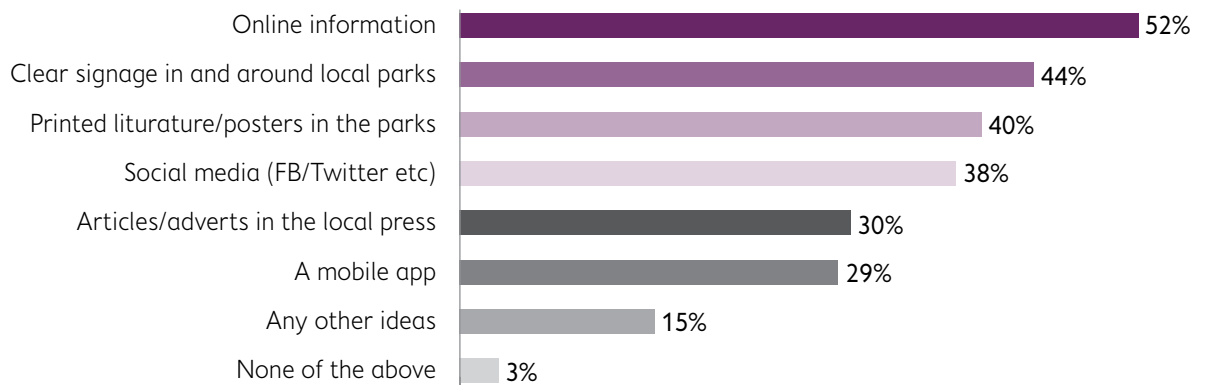


Better communication with you

The Council also took this opportunity to find out the best ways of keeping people updated about their parks and local spaces. Face-to-face survey respondents were given a number of options to choose from. Their answers are shown in Figure 6. Over half (52%) said they would be happy to get their information online.

Online survey respondents also stated that digital communications (e-newsletters, social media postings and information on a Council website) would be their preferred options. Many also mentioned having information available in parks themselves and Council buildings including schools where children could have access to information which they could share with their families.

Figure 6: Which of the following would you use to find out about your local parks and open spaces? (Percentage response from a base of 325)





Conclusions

It is very clear from this engagement, that Croydon's parks and open spaces are valued by the people who use them regularly. However, even these regular users of parks are not always aware of what they have to offer.

Better promotion and communication of all types of activities, events and features that parks have to offer is a consistent theme raised across all the areas from being more active to enjoying nature and wild life. Many think the Council could play a key role in enabling this exchange of information either by having a dedicated online resource that housed up-to-date information and / or by providing regular updates to interested parties via e-newsletters / newsletters or social media.

Another important issue raised across the board, is the issue of park cleanliness and maintenance. There was a consistent view that if parks were cleaner, better maintained and had basic facilities such as toilets, then individuals and families would be more likely to attend events, use parks as a place to be healthy and a place to socialise.

There was also a view that the income generating potential that parks could offer was not being fully realised at the moment particularly in terms of sponsorship opportunities or hiring out park space to sports and leisure providers or others who might want to host events in Croydon's parks.

There was also a will from people currently involved with the maintenance or improvement of their local parks and green spaces to work in partnership with the Council to make Croydon parks places everyone who lives in Croydon can be proud of and that more people can enjoy.





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