

# Parks and People



## *Stronger Together*

### Report of a series of greenspace community conferences throughout England

*strengthening greenspace community learning, empowerment, networking and partnerships*

Parks Action Group Community Empowerment Workstream



# Parks & People, Stronger Together

*strengthening greenspace community learning, empowerment, networking and partnerships*

## 2019 Regional Conferences: Aggregated Report

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## Summary

A series of nine 'Parks and People, Stronger Together' community conferences and mini-conferences for each region in England was held from April to November 2019.

The aim was to promote and strengthen community peer-learning, empowerment, coordination, networking and partnerships with landowners and management.

Seven of the nine events were organised by the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, Locality and Groundwork on behalf of the Parks Action Group. That programme was funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, guided by specific recommendations from the CLG Select Committee backed by the Minister for Parks. The other two events were under the same 'banner' but independently organised and funded by existing regional networks of Friends Groups.

Delegates from over 200 organisations from over 90 towns, villages and boroughs took part, around three quarters being from greenspace Friends and community groups, the others from Local Authorities and supportive third sector organisations. The events focused on enabling active and intense sharing of experiences and views, all of which were carefully captured and distilled.

The events themselves were enhanced by the MHCLG having also funded the improvement of the MyCommunity website resource and also an NFPGS networking post. Both were able to contribute to the events. Locality, for MyCommunity, were able to gather information about the needs of the groups present. The NFPGS did the publicity and gathered all the contact data in order to grow the movement and strengthen coordination throughout the Friends groups' networks, and also conducted its own online survey for Friends Groups. 380 groups took part in the survey with feedback on their strategic needs for improving their coordination and getting support from the PAG regarding wider policy issues.

Due to the importance of recognising and promoting community empowerment in the country's green spaces, the NFPGS and Groundwork are currently producing a special 'advocacy' document for widespread circulation throughout the sector. It will be based on the learning that came out of the Community Empowerment projects during 2019.

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## Key messages and calls for action

Some key messages have come out of these conferences and discussions.

**An inspirational movement of parks champions** There is a large, vibrant, inspirational and influential grassroots movement of thousands of independent groups of park users who are the 'eyes and ears', champions and advocates for their spaces on behalf of the users and local communities. The depth and breadth of work being regularly undertaken by tens of thousands of environmental volunteers throughout the country is astounding. Such 'Friends of parks' groups help animate their local spaces, organise social events, deliver healthy activities, contribute to maintenance, monitor and report maintenance issues, spread information and awareness, encourage partnership-working, bring in significant amounts of funding for their green spaces, and protect and enhance natural habitats. They generally want to work collaboratively with green space managers and other user groups, and want to encourage and support more volunteers to get involved.

Groups vary greatly in size, strength, diversity, membership (from dozens to thousands), range of activities, level of volunteering and influence. But, as the dozens of local group 'snapshot' presentations at the conferences showed, they all care passionately about greenspace and are prepared to do their best to promote, animate, protect and improve it.

**Potential to grow** There's great potential for this community involvement to spread, grow, develop, diversify and become more effective and resilient through sharing good practice and improving their peer-to-peer communication and coordination through their own area forums and networks. 44 groups attending asked for help in the development of new Forums for their areas. Such Forums can be 'game changers' for the sector in an area.

**Recognition and support** Friends and user groups are volunteers and often at the limit of their capacity. They need to be recognised, encouraged and supported by management and third sector organisations so they can grow in strength and influence, champion their site effectively, help to promote, animate and protect it and be real partners in discussions and decision-making over the running and future of their green spaces. This includes access to dedicated advice and information via national websites like [mycommunity.org.uk](http://mycommunity.org.uk) and [parkscommunity.org.uk](http://parkscommunity.org.uk)

There is widespread anxiety about the state of local green spaces and their maintenance and management. Progress and optimism need to be nurtured in order to avoid isolation, demoralisation or burnout.

**Collaboration between communities and management** Most landowners and managers are very willing in principle to support and work with communities and their greenspace community groups. In practice this can be complex and patchy, and

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requires time, commitment and expertise at a time when lack of resources is a serious and growing problem. Yet examples of great community/Council collaboration and partnership abound throughout the country and details of such good practice should be shared.

The community tends to want to 'add value' rather than be seen as a substitute for what should be a properly-run service. Underfunding and understaffing of local parks services are issues and challenges which need to be acknowledged, addressed and eventually overcome if community/Council partnership-working is to become the norm that all wish to see.

**Strengthening community voices and coordination** The NFPGS plays a vital role in providing the strategic voice of the greenspace friends movement, infrastructural encouragement and support for peer learning and grassroots development, and advocacy at national level. Also in promoting effective partnership-working at every level. The PAG funding for a networking post for a year and for these conferences made a real difference. The conferences have identified a range of real and pressing needs which now require following up over the next months and years.

The NFPGS needs to be supported to be able to move from a reliance on over-pressed volunteers to a fully staffed operation (including regional officers) so that it can take forward the community involvement and empowerment objectives articulated by the conferences - reflecting the recommendations of the Select Committee, Government and PAG - in particular the calls to promote and support the growth in the number of groups, their area Forums, and partnership-working within the sector.

The 'community-facing' national greenspace organisations should be recognised and supported in their provision of a range of highly-developed expertise, advocacy and support for greenspace generally and for active community groups in particular.

**Vision and resources for parks** Our parks and green spaces need good long term vision and planning, community involvement and empowerment, as well as partnership-working and adequate resources if they are to properly fulfil their unique and essential role at the heart of our communities and neighbourhoods.

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## Calls for action

The greenspace sector and all supportive funding and policy-making bodies should:

1. Celebrate, fully embrace and actively support the work of the Friends groups' movement and the principle of community empowerment throughout the country's public green spaces.
2. Encourage and support the growing efforts of local authorities and parks services to embrace community involvement and empowerment.
3. Promote collaboration and partnership-working at every level.
4. Support the ongoing and further development of peer-to-peer learning, and of new groups, Forums and networks, over the coming months and years.
5. Support the NFPGS to enable it to continue to provide and improve the essential infrastructural support for growing levels of community self-organisation and involvement, peer-to-peer learning, empowerment and co-ordination - and effective partnership-working at the strategic level between the Friends Groups' movement and the rest of the sector.
6. Address the calls for adequate funding and protection for the country's public green spaces.

## Background

The 'Parks and People; Stronger Together' project was a series of 9 regional greenspace community conferences and mini-conferences in every region of England, held from April to November 2019. It was a collaborative project organised by the National Federation of Parks Green Spaces (NFPGS), Locality, and Groundwork. Seven of the events were funded through the Parks Action Group (PAG) as a project of the PAG's Community Empowerment workstream. The PAG finances came from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The other two conferences were organised and funded via already-established regional friends groups' networks.

The organising groups, and indeed all the organisations involved in the PAG, believe that parks and people are stronger together. Much of the strategic discussion regarding the future of the greenspace sector is quite rightly on the 'nuts and bolts' of the physical infrastructure of public greenspace and the issues facing those responsible for its management. However an increasingly important part of the

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maintenance and management of all our green spaces is how to encourage and nurture local community engagement, involvement and empowerment.

The impetus to support this follows the rise over the last 20 years of the Friends groups' movement, now numbering over 6,500 groups throughout England and their increasing contributions and influence. So far there are around 70 area Forums linking together around half of the local groups. The NFPGS coordinates, supports and promotes the movement as whole. The aim of taking steps to help strengthen this movement was a recommendation of the 2017 'Future of Our Parks' Report by the Local Government Select Committee in Westminster, explicitly backed by the Minister for Parks in his response, and included in the terms of reference of the Parks Action Group backed by the ten sector organisations and nine Government Departments involved.

The PAG's Community Empowerment workstream proposed and was tasked with overseeing three projects – the enhancement and improvement of the MyCommunity website (managed through Locality), the strengthening of the Friends Groups' movement (through funding a Network Coordinator post for the NFPGS), and a series of specialist conferences for community groups.

For the conferences, Locality led on the administration, NFPGS led on the content and publicity, and Groundwork contributed strategic advice and oversight.

The NFPGS, Groundwork, Keep Britain Tidy and The Conservation Volunteers all produced specialist material and helped with facilitation.

The objectives of the events were to:

- To promote and encourage greater community empowerment in our public green spaces.
- To value and recognise how community engagement achieves positive social impact - by sharing learning and showcasing examples of how to contribute to the championing, maintenance and management of green spaces.
- To encourage and strengthen area networking and coordination among local greenspace Friends and community groups
- To promote and support the development of community/Council partnership-working
- To publicise the PAG, and to garner feedback to the PAG from some of the most engaged local greenspace groups in the sector

The target audiences were Friends of Parks and greenspace volunteer groups (75%), as well as councils, greenspace charities and other community organisations who work to support community empowerment in public green space (25%).

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Reps from 228 organisations based in 94 towns and local areas attended. [See appendix]. It seems that travel costs, especially considering the long distances and poor transport links across many regions, are a real challenge for many community groups as there was no money for fares except in exceptional cases. Also of course, the spare time needed to devote a whole Saturday on top of the other regular volunteering that delegates would be committed to.

All delegates attending received a detailed pack of documents with specialist information and advisory material related to each workshop and the wider aims of the events. Some of the material was created especially for the events. All have been made available online here:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1P36JrWZ01csN1Vo42GMDHSxOXquS-WWVv>

and will be circulated to all the key contacts made in each region. [See appendix]

## Sharing experiences and building links

The focus during the events was to discuss and share experiences and views through workshops, discussions, information-sharing and community group presentations for the benefit of all.

All contributions were documented, and individual reports for each event created [See appendix] to feedback to participants, those unable to attend and contacts made throughout each region. An Aggregated Report with learning, key messages and calls for action from the conferences would be made for the PAG, the wider sector and relevant Government departments.

Feedback from attendees was gathered to create new parks-related online signposting and resources for the MyCommunity website. The website was set up by MHCLG five years ago to provide information and signposting for the community sector on a whole range of relevant issues including parks and green spaces. Feedback from the events has been used to shape information on the site. The feedback has also fed into the development of the friends' movement's own new specialist website, parkscommunity, funded through the Rethinking Parks programme and launched in June 2019.

The NFPGS coordinated the publicity for the regional events, contacting and mapping the existing friends and community groups region by region, and also liaising with local authority greenspace officers and key third sector bodies in the relevant areas.

The NFPGS also decided to run a Community Empowerment survey throughout the period of the events to ask local friends groups all over England what their strategic

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priorities are for effective communication and coordination, and what key policies they would like the Parks Action Group and the Government to pursue to support the sector and England’s parks generally. 380 groups took part, and the results are summarised below and as an appendix.

## The events

Venue	Date	Registrations	Actual attendees	Towns / areas
NW - Birkenhead	Saturday 13 April	Not avail.	45	8
London	Monday 17 June	Not avail.	46	20 (estim.)
EM - Nottingham	Saturday 17 July	33	33	9
WM - Birmingham	Saturday 3 August	79	46	17
Y&H - Doncaster	Saturday 7 September	48	27	7
SE - Brighton	Saturday 21 September	31	23	19
E - Luton	Saturday 12 October	9	13	4
NE - Newcastle	Saturday 26 October	56	54	9
SW - Plymouth	Saturday 2 November	28	25	1

The events were held on a Saturday (except the London one) to suit the core audiences’ schedules, and timings were arranged to accommodate one-day travel. Venues were booked in close proximity to the station or in the city centre. Where possible they were community venues chosen to align with the ethos of the events.

## Workshops

The workshops were the core of each event. They were facilitated by reps from NFPGS, KBT, TCV and Groundwork, who briefly set the scene [see appendix] and enabled the maximum contribution from all present. . The themes prompted a lot of sharing of experiences and views - the vast range was impressive, with every site and every group having its own unique circumstances, history, character, capabilities and desires. Yet similar themes continually emerged.

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These were some of the key learning points:

### **Building a strong and diverse membership**

- Groups are strongest when they liaise with and involve as many park users as possible, attracting a range of people of all ages, interests, and social and cultural backgrounds. Many groups struggled to actively involve younger people and those from a more diverse ethnic background.
- Involvement takes time to build up – and it helps to have good relations with specialist user groups on site such as sports clubs and parent and toddler groups, and with nearby schools, faith groups, residents associations and other community organisations locally
- Interactions and communications around a green space develop in many different ways, depending on circumstances eg. through events, local surveys, social media, face to face discussions, word of mouth etc

### **Developing local volunteering and project management skills and capabilities**

- Groups benefit from continually seeking new volunteers for involvement in any events, projects and activities which they undertake.
- Managing volunteering sessions and coordinating projects can require commitment and specialist skills. These can be developed by groups seeking out and incorporating new members and reps with key skills and time.
- By coming together as area forums local groups in an area are able to share, discuss and develop good practice, and sometimes initiate training programmes. This process can be supported by local authorities, CVS services and national greenspace organisations.

### **Developing good partnership-working with site managers and Councils**

- Building good relationships between community groups and landowners and management is vital. It takes time, patience and development of mutual understanding and appreciation. Relations often develop through individual communication, identifying the right reps and officers for specific issues.
- There needs to be joint commitment. This can develop through joint working and mutual support (eg around maintenance issues, fundraising or improvements), and through specific policies and management agreements and plans for a site, with the roles of landowners and volunteer groups clearly defined.
- Naturally there will be tensions and disagreements from time to time, but also much to celebrate through email acknowledgements, press releases, and joint photo opportunities (eg with local authority officers or local councillors)
- Levels of community empowerment being sought and achieved - for parts of sites or for a site as a whole - can vary greatly depending on circumstances, capacity and aspirations.

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- Area Forums are crucial for sharing good practice, and for enabling and developing ongoing strategic communications, relationships and partnerships with local authorities

### **Accessing and ensuring adequate funding for groups, activities and projects, and for sites generally**

- Lots of small pots of funding are potentially available to groups for projects and activities. These can be sourced from a range of local and national funding bodies, but it's important to understand their criteria and align with group objectives.
- Advice and support is available online, and through local authorities, CVSs, and national greenspace organisations
- Funding for big projects may be an option for some groups – it is harder to get, and is time-consuming to apply for, manage and monitor. It generally requires specialist advice and support, and formal backing from the Council or landowner.
- Some groups fundraise through membership fees (this can be very time-consuming to administer), or increasingly via crowd-funding and seeking donations for a specific project - a PayPal button on a website can be helpful.
- Area Forums can advocate and lobby for Councils to ensure high priority and adequate funding levels for parks services as a whole

### **Promoting activities, groups and sites, including better use of social media**

- Effective promotion comes in many forms, often including email lists, social media, noticeboards, press releases, flyers, banners on gates, word of mouth, videos, branded T-shirts when active on site, stunts and photos for the media, and through joint efforts with partners. It depends on what is being promoted, who to, and capabilities.
- It's important to develop a range of media and of key messages, and for groups to identify who will be doing the communications work.
- Social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can be very good at building ongoing online communities and engaging various audiences.

## **Community presentations**

There were 60 short 'Just A Minute' community presentations during the conferences – 34 from local community groups and 26 from area Forums. These were inspirational, often very personal, and highly informative first hand accounts of challenges overcome, successes achieved, passion and commitment deployed, and ambition developed. They were greatly appreciated and often wildly applauded by delegates. [See appendix for the individual conference reports – to be completed]

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## The plenary

The final plenary sessions focused on discussing strategic matters, mainly how to strengthen networking and coordination, and views about the key issues to be fed back to the Parks Action Group and the Government. This followed presentations on these issues from the NFPGS representative on the PAG and the NFPGS Networking Coordinator.

There was a clear expressed need from community groups present for ongoing sharing of good practice and supporting one another effectively by strengthening and developing ongoing and effective area forums. In the feedback forms filled in at the very end, 44 groups explicitly asked for support in helping develop new such forums. Delegates also recognised the importance of regional and national communications through the NFPGS, and the NFPGS role in raising their voices in national platforms.

Feedback to the PAG and Government tended to be wide ranging with a key focus on the need to raise the profile of the importance of greenspace for communities and for lifestyles (particularly regarding health and well-being, and sustainability), and the need for such spaces to be properly resourced, maintained, managed and protected. [See Appendix]

## Questionnaire results

The NFPGS decided to run an online survey in parallel with the series of conferences taking place. The aim was to engage a wider range of groups than those who were able to attend the events, and to gauge their views and priorities for their needs for coordination and for strategic national action. There were 380 responses from friends groups and their area forums.

The results showed clear calls for:

- support for developing and strengthening ongoing communications and coordination among grassroots groups to enable a collective voice, peer learning and mutual aid
- support for partnership-working at all levels
- the Parks Action Group and Government to address and deliver effective protection and adequate funding for the country's green spaces.

[See Appendix 6 for the full Report]

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Agenda, Workshops topics and delegate pack documents

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1P36JrWZ01csN1Vo42GMDHSxOXquS-WWVv>

### Appendix 2 – List of towns attending

Delegates' towns, villages and boroughs, region by region.

#### **West Mids**

Coventry  
Birmingham  
Tipton  
Cannock  
Sheffield  
Atherstone  
Chelmsley Wood  
Wolverhampton  
Walsall  
Wednesbury  
Smethwick  
Kidderminster  
Rugby  
Oxford  
Redditch  
Solihull  
Stirchley

#### **South East**

Orpington/Kent  
Brighton  
Newhaven  
Peacehaven  
Worthing  
Wandsworth Common  
Lewes  
Canterbury  
Hove  
West Sussex  
Tunbridge Wells  
London  
Godalming

Crawley  
Newhaven  
Adur and Worthing  
Southampton  
Sompting  
Ovingdean

#### **Yorks & Humber**

Doncaster  
Bradford  
Hull  
York  
Leeds  
Sheffield  
Hessle

#### **East**

Luton  
Hatfield  
Hemel Hempstead  
Grays

#### **North West**

Liverpool  
Manchester  
Wirral  
Sefton  
Knowsley  
St Helens  
Cheshire West  
Chester East  
Trafford  
Manchester

Warrington

#### **North East**

Newcastle  
Sunderland  
Teeside  
Gateshead  
Tyneside  
Northumberland  
Scarborough  
Northallerton  
South Shields

#### **East Mids**

Nottingham  
Gedling  
Newark  
Cotgrave  
Chesterfield  
Woodthorpe  
Grantham  
Boston  
Derby  
Horncastle

#### **South West**

Plymouth

#### **London**

15-20 boroughs (exact data not available)

### Appendix 3 – Feedback to Parks Action Group

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Messages to the Parks Action Group as expressed (plenary) or written (postcards)

### West Midlands

- There should be more awareness of covenants – like Fields in Trust - as they are important to protect land in perpetuity.
- One group was facing its fourth campaign in 20 years to save their land from developers. They would like developers and Council to stop looking at green spaces as a cheap source of income. There are of more value than money.
- Parks often look like deficits in council budgets as they don't recognise their wider value. This should be debated at a national level.
- There should be a more conscious distribution of green spaces. Some areas have a lot and some not very much. Green spaces should be planned and put in planning regulations/developer contracts. People should have a right to live within walking distance of a well-managed green space.
- More works should be carried out on the asset value of parks e.g. trees are asset value of £1,000 each.
- One group raised the importance of wild green spaces in the city. Children should have the opportunity to experience wild nature. Parks are changing from just recreation and sports to also areas of wild growth.
- Parks prove to be a joy to all sections of the community.
- Parks are not a luxury, but an essential.

### South East

- To reverse 10 years of serious underfunding, will take some time. The Friends movement is very important because we collaborate and want also to collaborate at a national level
- Is the Health and wellbeing link being maximised?
- I'm worried that we focus on the existing parks, but the new parks are not happening or are terribly designed.
- I work for the Council. We have a health officer and talk about green spaces for health and wellbeing. but there is a lot of development and it's important to work with the developers but as a council we also depend on regional council.
- Green Flag awards, we can lobby at local level to achieve that national standard. I'm a council parks officer and judge for South East in Bloom,

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sometimes an award from South East In Bloom can help with leverage with the council.

#### Yorks and Humber

- Attendees wanted to know when they can hear the outputs from the PAG. What are they up to? Brexit is delaying things.
- Local Authorities are declaring Climate Emergency which means that parks and green space will be seen as essentials. It would benefit groups to link their activities to Council sustainability policy and staff. It will be part of every Councillor's portfolio.
- Park and green spaces should generate funds from assets they have e.g. plant nursery, Go Ape, concerts, apprentice schemes, train people to assess parks with council officer to council benchmarks/standards.

#### East

- Threats to the future of parks are a key issue, development is a big issue driven mostly by private development. The importance of greenspaces is a main message.
- Loss of staffing, especially experienced and skilled staff because of cuts and because of contracting.
- There needs to be a link to the department of education re education of children and training for young adults.

#### North East

- Volunteers need to be appreciated and supported as resources dwindle and responsibilities get higher.
- Put into law a statutory duty to manage Parks and Green spaces.
- Some local authorities seem to be blind to the fact the volunteer groups can get funds the councils can't access. This could release more funds to the parks this way.
- Loss of expertise, so need to go outside local authority for advice. Hard if you want to do a major project and you have to go outside the council.
- Measurable standards – groups would like them to be pulled together so the parks can use them to speak to local authority, funders and public to justify investment. Natural capital accounting, health benefits, carbon capture etc.

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- Local authorities have had different level of cuts. Newcastle was very high cuts and very high problems, so they have impossible decisions to make.
- Parks and health will be competing for the same money if use the same rationale.
- Press should be more involved with the findings of this group/meetings. Forums are the best way to get the press involved. They need to build up skills and relationship with press/media.

## East Midlands

- I work in the field of planning and more and more the developers are retaining ownership of the land, rather than local authorities now so management will be taken out of the usual hands and owned and maintained by private companies. There is a debate at a national level on these issues. It would be useful to have a charter (for us at the council). Could it be asked that it should be managed to a Green Flag Award standard for at least X amount of years. Important areas of discussion about who should be managing and paying for green spaces.
- PAG with different departments, is Department of Health involved? Health used to be the number 1 reason on the agenda for parks. But as LAs are managing parks, even in their agenda the health reasons have worked.
- We tried to engage with local health department, but it has been hard and the health service feels fragmented, it really depends on the GP surgery but it's worth trying especially including social prescribing. Local forum sits in on various health organisations. Another forum reported putting pressure for public health funding for parks. In Derby there is a Live Well Scheme and that has brought in more volunteers and engagement. It is now volunteer-led and not council-led.
- Isn't the only way to guarantee green spaces and standards through legislation?
- The NHS is undergoing a big reorganisation which should mean that they need to collaborate more at a local level.
- Public green spaces provide huge statutory benefits, but they don't get the funding they need to be of full benefit to people
- Directly go at the GP level to encourage people to go to local organisations, games groups, walking groups. Go directly to where your audience is.

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- Struggling with number of events being held in the parks, but if the events aren't being held, they don't get the money to pay for the upkeep of the park. Money from events pay for groundskeepers etc.
- Councils are being encouraged to make money and commercialise their parks and green spaces. They say, "Please don't grumble, we need to do this to keep the park open."

South West

[Not available]

London

[Not available]

North West

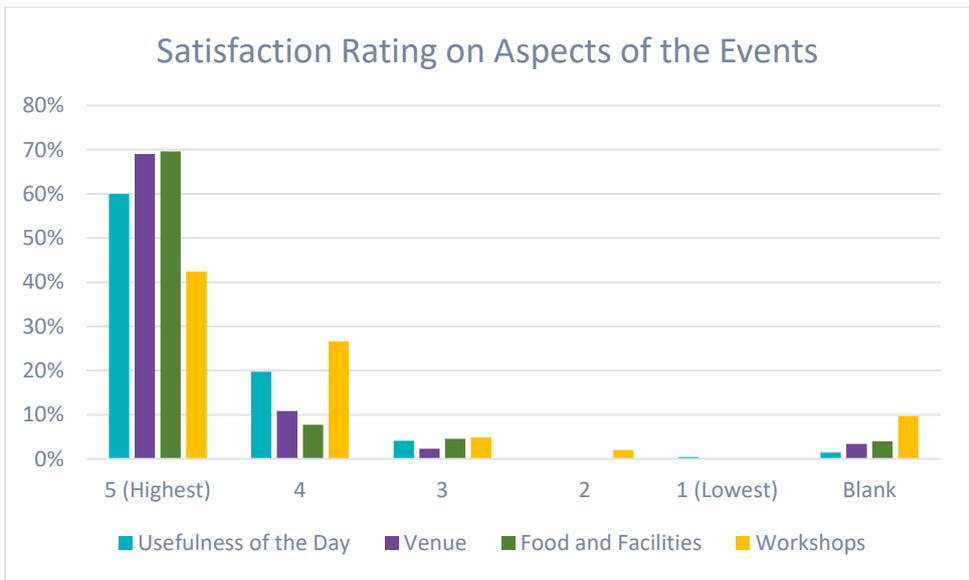
[Not available]

#### Appendix 4 – The Post-conference feedback

The response was very positive, with high scores and appreciative comments on the feedback forms. The sector can use the feedback to improve future events, for example all the workshops received an even level of attendance and achieved good scores of 5 or 4. However they did not score as highly as the usefulness of the day. This suggests that the format of the workshops might benefit from a slight review for future events.

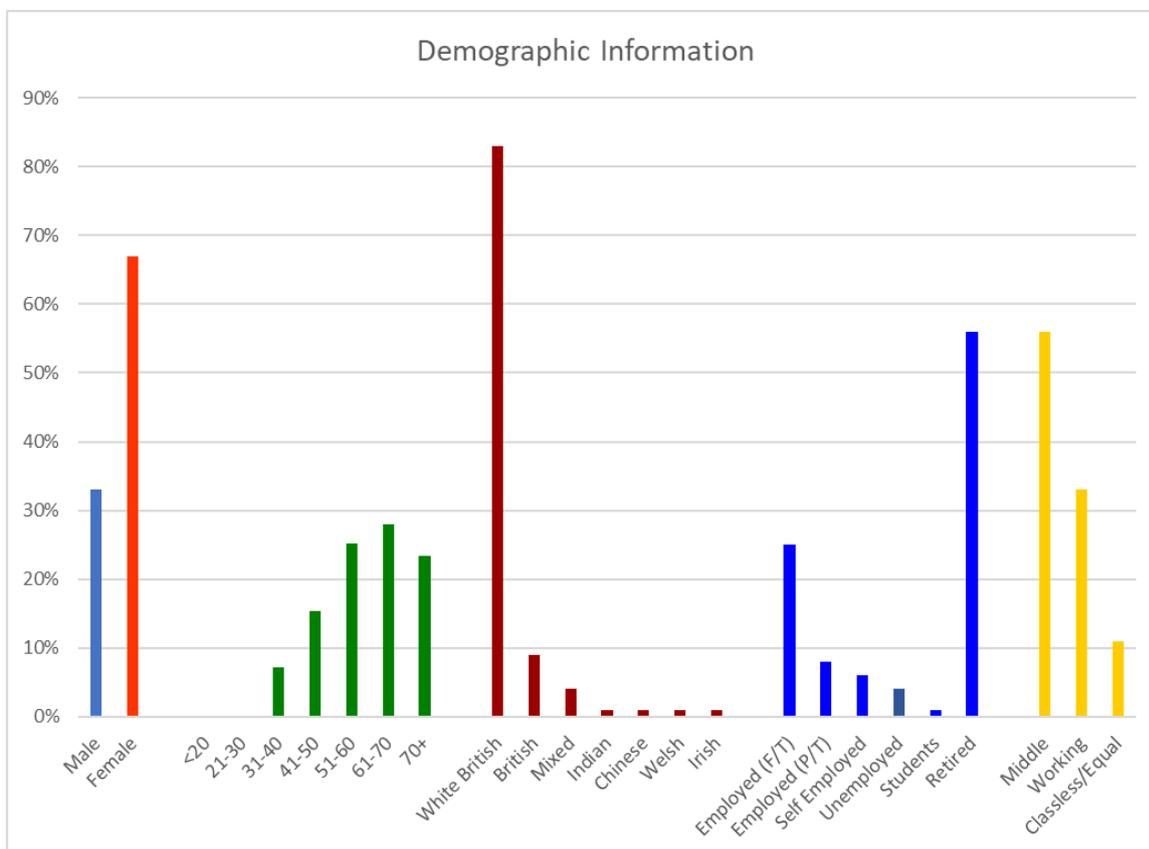
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Graph above: Delegates’ demographic information shown as percentages

Appendix 5 – The Reports from each of the individual conferences

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/page-conferences-2019/>

Appendix 6 – The Questionnaire Results and Report

<https://natfedparks.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NFPGS-Greenspace-Community-Empowerment-Survey-Report-June-2020.pdf>

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