About the Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator

The Future Parks Accelerator is a national programme that aims to help local authorities transform their parks and open spaces and make sure these valuable places achieve financial sustainability, so that communities can continue to benefit from them for generations to come. The programme is a collaboration between the National Lottery Heritage Fund, National Trust and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government to find new models of operation and funding that address the decline of parks and open spaces that has been experienced over the last ten to fifteen years.

The Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator project is one of just eight projects across the country that has received funding to find ways of looking after parks and open spaces, now and in the future. It has been working to explore new ways to transform, manage and fund open spaces across the city of Birmingham in a sustainable way for the future. The project involves many services areas across the Council working with the voluntary sector and community-based organisations across the city to test new ways of working and to agree a vision for parks and green spaces for the future.

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator launched in July 2019 and will run until July 2022. Originally a two-year project, the programme timescales were extended due to the impact of COVID-19.

The funding through the Future Parks Accelerator programme has allowed Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator to create a dedicated team to manage and oversee the delivery of the project, working alongside project partners.
Birmingham Greenground
A City of Nature

It may surprise you to hear that Birmingham is home to over 650 green spaces - ranging from small playing fields to over 600 greenspaces-ranging from small playing fields to expansive nature reserves, connected by our unique canal networks, routes and walkways. Each and every one of these spaces are vital to our wellbeing, acting as spaces for us to play, socialize and make memories. The Greenground map for Birmingham contains only a snapshot of the parks we have in our City, but who knows, maybe there’s a space near you waiting to be discovered!

#GreengroundMap
How has the project been delivered?

Naturally Birmingham is working as a cross-council strategic project, testing new approaches coupled with people’s views and values held at local level through four community pilots. Each one is led by a strategic city council theme, of housing, skills, children, and health.

The four pilots are:

- A Skills-led project at Ward End Park and wider neighbourhood – developing future skills requirement for the sector and how to link to the regional jobs programmes, how to get volunteers involved in other aspects of parks management; how to get large employers within the city to value green space as an asset for their employees.

- The health initiative - involving the local community through partner organisations and local health centres to test how we really embed green spaces as part of social prescribing. This will link locally and nationally with the Public Health agenda;

- A Housing initiative - will look at different ways of integrating urban green space and parks to better serve local communities. The council’s Planning department will be involved to ensure green spaces in housing are supported and managed in more meaningful ways;

- Children’s initiative - focused on better engaging children and young people with green spaces both in early years as well as in our most vulnerable children in care through corporate mentoring.

The initial phase of the project, the Co-design Phase focused on the delivery of the pilot projects, bringing the project partners together to test new ways of working and new ideas. Alongside this work there was extensive engagement activity to raise awareness of the project and to encourage greater participation and to join the team working to find solutions. A successful gateway review with the national Future Parks Accelerator team then allowed the project to progress to the Transition Phase where the learning and models were brought together to set out a long-term strategy. This work led to the development of the City of Nature Plan, aligned with the adopted vision for the city set out in the ‘Our Future City Plan’.
Vision and Aims

The purpose of the Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator project is to ensure green spaces are considered:

- As vital community living spaces;
- As to their role in defining local character, identity and place making;
- As to their importance for nature and climate change adaptation;
- For sport and recreation;
- For health and wellbeing;
- As places to stimulate business and enterprise.

The project aimed to deliver the following benefits:

- Parks and green spaces will have more support for their management
- A wider range of people will be involved in parks and green spaces
- The organisation’s funding for parks and green spaces will be more resilient
- The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit
- People will have developed skills
- People will have greater wellbeing
The figure 'Bid on a Page' shows the project objectives and how these linked to the overall vision and aims.
How has the Project Been Delivered?

The Pilot project activity, successes and learning are summarised in the case studies.

The delivery against the project outcomes is discussed below and then consideration is given to the development of the long term strategy: The Birmingham City of Nature Plan.
PROJECT AIMS & OBJECTIVES

- ‘Bring the green sector to life’ -> showcase, promote and develop learning for young people on jobs and careers within the green sector
- Curation and engagement work, encompassing the principles of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) ‘Nurturing Skills for 21st Century Parks’ report
- Develop relationships with businesses and educational organisations to enhance opportunities for careers within the environmental/green sector
- Creation of green apprenticeships/works placements within both Birmingham City Council and other organisations in the region

PILOT LOCATION - WARD END PARK, BIRMINGHAM

PILOT LOCATION

Why was the pilot necessary?

Addressing the climate and biodiversity crises in the United Kingdom requires forward thinking, industrious and motivated employees across all sectors. The green and environmental industries have historically been stereotyped as being unglamorous with challenging working conditions, however this could not be further from the truth. Birmingham needs a vibrant, young, and innovative Parks workforce, that is more representative of the diversity within the region, and that can bring a broader range of skills. By engaging the younger generation and showcasing the exciting and varied range of employment opportunities available in this area, the city can move in the right direction towards meeting its carbon neutrality ambition and become greener, fairer and healthier.

“Young person doesn’t always want to do loads of studying or have to get 10 GCSE’s...they want to learn that you can have a job where not every day is the same and you’re not expected to sit in an office”

KEY WORKSTREAMS

- YouTube video introductions to green careers -> ‘Why I love my job’ format
- Social media interaction and engagement -> Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
- Virtual and in-person environmental career days with numerous schools
- ‘Skills showcase’ sessions - virtually and in person at parks around Birmingham
- ‘Sow and grow’ courses - teaching gardening and horticulture skills

With thanks to:

- Sophie Hislam (lead)
- Tara Verrell
- The Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) team
ACHIEVEMENTS

- 27 YouTube videos from professionals working in the green industry, explaining their jobs and why they love them -> roles ranging from park ranger, arborist, horticulturalist, energy engineer, sustainability specialist, landscape architect and more, including Jane Findlay, president of the Landscape Institute!

- Engaging local, national, and international businesses -> gaining their support in creating events and sessions but also promoting their opportunities via social media and education/employment events

- Developing relationships with schools and colleges -> career focus webinars, job fairs, Birmingham City Council (BCC) schools noticeboard

- Online and in-person ‘skills showcase’ events + ‘walk and talk’ in parks -> informally engaging young people and communities about the opportunities and scope of working in green spaces/outdoors

- ‘Green champions’ - Volunteer based recruitment of 60 people passionate about green spaces who then undertook a workshop based training programme, aiming to empowering individuals to act as ‘change agents’ within their communities

- Green & environmental sector placements recruited through the ‘Kickstarter’ programme -> 5 x Trainee Parks Rangers, 3 x Trainee Grounds Maintenance Roles, 4 x Trainee Wildlife Assistant Roles, 1 x Trainee Parks Communications Officer

- Sow and grow courses -> £10,368 RHS Flourish funding secured, allowing the courses to run at no cost to unemployed candidates

- Embedding green skills in the BCC Adult Education programme -> recruitment of a dedicated tutor for this purpose

- Birmingham city council ‘green apprenticeships’ in the pipeline

What have the challenges been

- The Covid-19 pandemic:
  - Requirement for remote and virtual working throughout the majority of the course of the pilot due to lockdowns
  - Challenging business climate -> staff being furloughed, very little new work opportunities arising

Further information and resources:

- https://naturallybirmingham.org/about/
- https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/ourfuturecityplan
Health & Wellbeing Pilot Evaluation

**PROJECT AIMS & OBJECTIVES**
- Engage local GPs and social prescribing link workers with green space activities
- Enhance the local offer for organised health & wellbeing services taking place outdoors
- Increase the profile of and improve the ease of access to green space activities
- Evidence the mental health benefits of connecting with nature

**PILOT LOCATION - WITTON LAKES, BIRMINGHAM**

Why the pilot was needed...

Birmingham’s reputation as a grey & industrial metropolis is incorrect- the city has over 622 parks and green spaces. Evidence proving the physical, mental, psychological and social health benefits of connecting with nature is abundant, but residents of the city experience inequality in access to, and the quality of, parks and other natural environments. Parks and green spaces in Birmingham need to be protected, enhanced, and primed to help boost the health of citizens!

- Virtual ‘active in nature’ sessions
- ‘Buddy scheme’ for local walking within parks and green & blue spaces
- Growing kit delivery with virtual grow from a seed competition
- Sensory walks in nature
- Meditation walks
- Community co-creation workshops

*PILOT LOCATION – WITTON LAKES, BIRMINGHAM*

With thanks to:
- Rob Netherway and all of the team at Witton Lodge Community Association
- Hamira Sultan and the Future Parks Accelerator
Key achievements

- Relationships and partnerships developed with the local Primary Care Network (PCN) of 7 GP practices, as well as with the Active and Wellbeing Society (TAWS) and their local Social Prescribing Link Worker.
- Optimised approach and ‘offer’ to GP practices based on their feedback → creating a concise ‘menu’ of activities and communicating in a way that makes sense to Healthcare professionals
- Engaging the local community with Witton Lakes Park via the curation of over 20 activities that aimed to connect people with nature
- Statistically significant improvements in mental health ONS outcomes amongst a study of 50 programme participants:
  - 25% improvement in Life Satisfaction
  - 25% improvement in Happiness
  - 27% improvement in Self Worth
  - 31% reduction to Anxiety levels

Challenges

- The Covid-19 pandemic:
  - High clinical workload for GPs → shifting priorities and reduced capacity to engage
  - Lockdown regulations necessitating virtual/remote activities for large periods
  - Fear of coronavirus resulting in changing citizen’s attitudes and reluctance in many leaving their homes

Further information and resources:

- https://naturallybirmingham.org/about/
- https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/ourfuturecityplan

"...it not only helped mental wellbeing but also physical as well... and we have reduced the need for them to go to the GP as often as a result of the activity!"
Housing Pilot Evaluation

PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- Demonstrate how the most can be made of communal spaces in housing developments by creating a community garden
- Engage the local community in the design and management of green space
- Develop more structured policies to ensure planning processes take complete account of green infrastructure and open spaces

WHY WAS THE PILOT IMPORTANT?

Green spaces provide residents and the broader community with a wide range of benefits, from improving the local environment to simply creating more pleasant surroundings. Creating a safe environment for recreation and social interaction can also tackle isolation and encourage everyone to interact and support each other.

WHAT WAS TRIALLED AND TESTED IN THE PILOT?

Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust (BMHT), Services for Older People, Harpers (BMHT contractor) and the Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) team worked with residents from the Cornerway Sheltered Housing Scheme in Kings Norton to develop a community garden.

A draft green space checklist was created to ensure development applications account fully for green space development and design. A working group consisting of Birmingham City Council (BCC) Development Management teams, BMHT and legal representatives was established to make procedural changes to ensure green space is delivered effectively and consistently using the checklist.

ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE PEOPLE

- Letters issued to residents
- Survey distributed to residents to establish initial interest in the project
- Two on-site design workshops with residents
- Three community workshops on the green space checklist

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING THE GREEN SPACE CHECKLIST

- 50 housing applications reviewed by BCC and a team of graduates
- Action plan developed
- Green space checklist developed
- Working group and steering group established
- Implement procedural change to support use of green space checklist
- Green space checklist being trialled at Adderley Park
- Gather evidence and refine green space checklist and procedures

Special thanks to:

Andy Lindop, Development Plan Officer
Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager
Housing Pilot Evaluation

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Harpers constructed the community garden for free under their Social Charter
- Residents of Cornerway who were not socialising are now utilising the community garden
- Residents were passionate about the community garden and maintaining the space in future; they just needed to be engaged
- The green space checklist is being trialled on the Adderley Park project and the community group have secured £20,000 for improvements

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- Limited engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Limited funding to develop plans
- Loss of momentum due to limited time and resources
- Limited communication and understanding between different departments and stakeholders
- Lack of resources in the BCC Development Management team to enforce the green space checklist

HOW WE OVERCAME THE BARRIERS

- Community workshops were held outdoors
- Community group established at Adderley Park who secured £20,000 for improvements
- Set up steering group to oversee the working group and ensure the “wheel keeps spinning”
- Kept communication open and consistent between the contractors and residents from the outset
- Ensure the checklist is supported by procedures that warrants developers submit evidence for accounting for green space

FUTURE PLAN AND ACTION

- Lessons learnt from developing the community garden are now being applied to other projects
- Work within BMHT team to ensure social responsibility criteria are used in future contracts
- Work with tenants at Cornerway to set up a constituted Friends Group who can apply for funding for maintaining the community garden
- Further refine the green space checklist using public health evidence
- Exploring future fundings models for green space, such as service charges for new builds
- Ensure the working group is maintained, reports regularly to steering group and take new BCC initiatives into account

LESSONS LEARNED

- Be realistic and manage expectations
- Ensure open communication between all parties
- Get involved and engage as much as possible
- Every step counts; deal with each problem as it arises as there is always a way around
- Invest in measures to secure further funding, such as consultants, rather than spending it outright

This case study is part of the Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Project. More information can be found at naturallybirmingham.org
PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

• Change how people see green spaces; making the invisible visible
• Create opportunities for children to visit their local green spaces while ensuring it improves their physical and mental well being
• Increase nature connectedness in local children

WHY WAS THE PILOT IMPORTANT?

The parks and green spaces in Birmingham provide real benefits for children and their families. However, access to green space varies throughout the city, highlighting and intensifying existing inequalities. Therefore, the mission was to support children and families in maximising their use of green space for their well-being and making green spaces a part of their everyday life.

WHAT WAS TRIALLED AND TESTED IN THE PILOT?

• Bringing green spaces to life and creating opportunities for children and families to use them for health and well being
• Using Dawberry Fields as the pilot area, engaging and involving local communities in their local park to encourage them to spend time in green spaces
• Telling children and young people about why nature is important through engagement, education and training with schools, early years and the Children’s Trust

ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE PEOPLE

• Word of mouth through lots of conversations with young people in the local community
• Posters in Dawberry Fields
• Regular updates on social media, newsletters
• Website links promoted and distributed widely
• Online webinars to train teachers and early practitioners in using outdoor spaces
• A self-guided nature trail to connect residents in Dawberry Fields
• Outdoor mentoring sessions and activities

Special thanks to:

Debbie Needle,
Community facilitator
FPA

Samantha Hall,
Children’s Pilot lead in
FPA
Children’s Pilot Evaluation

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Established a Friends of Dawberry Fields group to look after their local park
- Created mentors in the Children’s Trust, who will train others in utilising the green spaces and creating green skills
- Successful Green Champion and Young Green Champion programme
- Engagement of schools and early years in green spaces

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

- COVID-19 was the biggest challenge, leading to:
  * Disruption of face-to-face meetings
  * Working with a new team entirely online
  * Restrictions to using Park Ranger service
- Cultural barriers and changing mindsets

HOW WE OVERCAME THE BARRIERS

- Swapped to online work and webinars
- Communicated through social media and the website
- Open communication with local people to see issues from their perspective
- Interacting with the community to "break the ice"

LESSONS LEARNED

- It’s not about green space; it’s about individual’s connection with nature and keeping the conversations going
- Anything is achievable if you keep at it
- Share both good things and bad things with the team and other organisations involved
- Learn from experiences in the pilot

EVIDENCE TO SHOW SUCCESS

- Feedback for online webinars
- Tweets on social media
- Feedback from Green Champion programme and 30 families involved
- Engagement and connections from schools and early year settings
- Over 150 Earth Stories about the value of green spaces submitted on the website

Earth Story themes:

- Health Benefits, 28.3%
- Community Benefits, 17.4%
- Future Aspirations, 16.5%
- Memories, 13.7%
- Environmental Value, 10.9%
- Economic Value, 3.4%
- COVID-19 9.8%

FUTURE PLAN AND ACTION

- Delivery of work around activities in the Bordesley and Highgate area, then the other six wards
- Seeing the objective evidence through the appreciative enquiry and measuring activity levels
- Alliance and the team have been set up and will start delivery in January

This case study is part of the Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Project. More information can be found at naturallybirmingham.org
What has the Project Achieved?

Overall, the project can demonstrate significant progress with 77.4% of project outputs completed and a further 22.6% in progress and on track to be completed by the end of the project.
The project has been successful in substantially delivering the outputs that were set out in the original application of the Future Parks Accelerator programme. The methods for delivering some of these outputs, and associated outcomes has evolved and responded to local circumstances and new opportunities, but the project has to a large degree been delivered as intended. There are clear threads that run through the project linking the original objectives to project delivery. The project has substantially delivery against the National Lottery Heritage Fund outcomes and has built the foundations for longer term change to ensure that:

- Heritage will be Better Managed;
- Heritage will be in Better Condition;
- Your Local Area / Community will be a Better Place to Live, Work or Visit;
- Your Organisation will be more Resilient;

And through this process there is evidence that “People have Developed Skills’ through working together to explore solutions and deliver activities which support the project aims and objectives. The project has also successfully delivered against the short and medium term outcomes set out in the Evaluation Framework with 72% delivered in full and 28% either in progress or delivered in part.

The Pilot projects have tested new ways of working and provided a structured approach to test new activities and approaches through a process of co-design and peer learning. This has resulted in finding new ways to work together, breaking down silos and sharing skills. The activities have engaged new audiences and focused on areas of the city where there have typically been lower levels of participation. In delivering the pilot projects the project can demonstrate improvements in how residents engage with green spaces across the pilot sites. The project can clearly demonstrate innovation with:

- Stronger linkages developed with housing management to support and make existing green spaces in housing more usable and accessible by residents and tenants;
- Development of skills showcase (online and physical) to highlight the range of jobs available in green spaces and how to access them;
- Finding new ways to connect residents to nature through virtual means and improving their wellbeing through doing so;
- Development of a green spaces training pack for use by mentors supporting our most vulnerable young people in the city;
- Embedding green space thinking within the Early Years team at the Council, and in settings, improving awareness and understanding of nature for children;
- Developed a Little Green Champions and Young Green Champions digital pack for use by education settings and families;
- Included nature and Green Infrastructure as part of the Birmingham City Design Guide;
- Running a Green Champions leadership course for 80 Birmingham citizens and employees to support them in leading for nature.
What are the Key Successes & Learning?

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator has been successful in raising awareness of the value of green space within the Birmingham City Council and the links to climate change mitigation and adaption, nature recovery and Covid-19 recovery. In this sense the project has helped broaden the influence of parks and green space within the city.

The project has been successful in building a new cohort of professionals within Birmingham City Council working to deliver improvements to green space, with greater understanding of how this aligns with their department’s goals and that of the Council. There is evidence to show there is now greater leadership and greater co-ordination and barriers to delivering future change have also been reduced. Stakeholders, both officers and members have noted that there is now a greater political will to deliver positive change for parks and green spaces across the city and to realise their potential.

One stakeholder noted that the Future Parks Accelerator had been particularly effective in the policy arena. “More has been done in the last one or two years in setting strategic direction that has been achieved in a long, long time”.

These significant changes have underpinned the development of the City of Nature Plan, development of the City of Nature Alliance and a new city-wide governance structure to support this. This work has formed the keystone to the Transition Phase and the project has developed a long-term strategy to establish Birmingham as a City of Nature though five frameworks:

- A Green City;
- A Healthy City;
- A Fair City;
- An involved City;
- A Valued City.

The development of the Environmental Justice Audit tool and map is a key success of the project and is a model that can be replicated by other local authorities across the UK. This has allowed the concept of Environmental Justice to be explored and quantified, helping to identify priority wards across the city. Linked to this the development of the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard will identify improvements at a site-specific level and allow a costed plan of improvements to be developed.
Case Study

Environmental Justice Tool

Project aims and objectives

The Naturally Birmingham FPA programme aimed to provide a new context for the natural and green environment in Birmingham by establishing a common thread across the agendas of climate emergency, ecological emergency, and the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Initially a site audit tool for planning and thinking during the co-design stage of the FPA programme, this evolved into the development of a wider Environmental Justice Tool that linked environmental quality with demographic data highlighting social inequalities.

The audit results would allow the Council to know where resources needed to be prioritised and provide evidence for developing further actions and policies. An Environmental Justice Map which considers access to green space, health inequalities (through excess years of life lost), flood risk, urban heat island effect and the indices of multiple deprivation was produced to show where in the city these compound issues are being felt most. The analysis was carried out at a Ward level for all 69 wards in Birmingham.

Environmental Justice is about ensuring that there is an equal distribution of environmental benefits, resources and opportunities across society and the natural world. This can be achieved when the natural world is used to create quality environments that both support our health and wellbeing and help to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Why was the project important?

People living in more deprived areas have poorer health and wellbeing, poorer educational outcomes, poorer access to work, poorer air quality, and suffer more from the impact of climate change. The impact of Covid-19 on cities has exposed the inequity of access to urban green spaces and nature and it is these same communities who are more likely to face increased risk to climate change and its related effects and consequences.

Access to green space across the city is not equitable and some sections of Birmingham’s diverse population of over 1 million people face barriers in accessing green spaces, participating in activities, or making full use of facilities on offer and the multi-faceted benefits this can provide.

The development of an audit tool that included but went beyond the IMD (Indices of Multiple Deprivation) to include additional indicators would allow the Council to set new priorities to reduce the gaps in provision and increase Environmental Justice in the City.
Those areas of the city where there is least environmental justice for citizens living there are shown on the Environmental Justice Map in red. Access to green space is lowest for these ‘red wards’ - these are areas are urban heat islands, a flood risk, have high levels of deprivation, and have worse health and wellbeing. The Green wards are converse to this. The City of Nature vision will address this inequality by taking those parks and open spaces within red wards, and through collaborative and coordinated actions, help to improve their quality and support the ward to turn green.

What was trialled and tested as part of the project?

The FPA programme allowed the Council to look at how other cities around the world have responded to this issue of unequal access to green space. The approach of combining existing IMD with other indicators was initially piloted in the East Birmingham Corridor, as well as ecological mapping and testing the national DEFRA Green Infrastructure tools.

From looking at similar responses by cities around the world and trailing the metrics, five additional indicators for calculating Environmental Justice scores for each ward in the City were chosen:

Activities to engage people

In summer 2021, the Council worked as a project partner to Co.LAB, an interdisciplinary design and research initiative within the Birmingham School of Architecture & Design, Birmingham City University. In collaboration with the Council, students examined frameworks for Environment Justice and Green Infrastructure to improve the quality of life and environment specifically for the Ward End Community in the north-east of the City.

As a result of the Co.LAB project, students produced a ‘Practitioner’s Guide: Frameworks for Environmental Justice’. The project allowed the students to look at:

- what defines Environmental Justice;
- other city’s concepts of Environmental Justice;
- the need for and identifiers of Environmental Justice;
- barriers to considering Environmental Justice for practitioners

A toolkit was then developed based on the Ward End community case study.
Key achievements

Birmingham is the first city in the UK to develop a tool to highlight the inequalities in accessing green space alongside other key measures and produce an Environmental Justice Map which considers access to green space, health inequalities, flood risk, urban heat island effect and the indices of multiple deprivation.

The application of the Environmental Justice Tool has provided new evidence to set new service priorities for the Parks Service, and for the Council it has been one of the building blocks of the ‘City of Nature’ vision. The information derived from the audit and mapping has fed into the Council’s 25 year City of Nature plan which aims to fast track all parks and open spaces identified as ‘red wards’ i.e. having less Environmental Justice, and has set a new direction for city policy in an urgent response to climate change, nature recovery and people’s wellbeing. The plan aims to move these Wards from their current standard to reach a standard that will directly address climate change, nature recovery and wellbeing. At a site level this is being assessed using the new Birmingham City Fair Parks Standard which will be applied to highlight actions that need to be taken to raise quality and turn red wards green.

Evidence to show success

Six wards identified as ‘red wards’ as a result of the Environmental Justice Tool will have the Fair Parks Standard applied to them and action plans put in place. This is already being piloted in the Bordesley and Highgate Ward where an action plan and costings for improvements have been put together.

Following the pilot in Bordesley and Highgate, the use of the Fair Parks Standard will be rolled out to five more red wards: Castle Vale, Nechells, Gravelly Hill, Balsall Heath West, and Castle Vale.

Challenges and barriers

One of the main challenges in developing the tool was selecting and testing the right options to develop a resource that was meaningful and drew on existing data and standards. For example, for measuring access to green space, the tool was initially going to be aligned with Natural England’s Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt). However, this was changed to use the standard set out in the Birmingham Development Plan of access to a green space (of 2 hectares or larger) within 1km.

It also became apparent that for the Tool to have a practical application at a site level and to effect change, the Fair Park Standard needed to be developed and so further resource was required to create this.
Future plans and actions

The Environmental Justice Audit methodology has been built upon via the development of ‘Birmingham Fair Parks Standard. This standard aims to increase environmental justice in terms of the city’s parks offer to citizens by assessing each park at a local level against the same 5 city wide themes in the City of Nature Plan. These are:

- **Fair**: is it welcoming, accessible, clean and safe?
- **Green**: are there different trees and plants, are there habitats for wildlife, is it managed sustainably?
- **Healthy**: are there walking routes, quiet areas, activities, is the park used for social prescriptions; and play value?
- **Involved**: can you find out what’s happening in your park, can you influence what is happening?
- **Valued**: do we know the worth of what the park provides, is that shared, are there ways to raise extra funds?

Over the course of the 25-year period of the Plan, all parks will be assessed against the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard and action plans will be created for all those not meeting the Standard.

This approach will first be trialled in one of the red wards – Bordesley and Highgate Ward. It will then be subsequently piloted in five other red wards to bring together council departments and community organisations to focus on the green spaces in these wards.

The Bordesley and Highgate Ward pilot will be delivered by the City of Nature Alliance which was also an outcome from the FPA programme.

Work is also being done to see how the information in the Environmental Justice Tool can be converted into a Climate Risk Assessment for use in development decisions and to highlight mitigation measures.

Lessons Learnt

**Breaking down silos**

As with the NBFP A programme as a whole, the Environmental Justice Tool was not just about the Parks Service or led by Parks people. It was essential to involve and engage staff across the Council, although due to Covid-19 it was not always easy to keep the Park Service engaged throughout the process. This will be imperative going forward as the Parks Service will be working much more closely with Health, Housing and other parts of the Council (and vice versa) to deliver actions on the ground. Working with GIS teams was also vital as the Tool became a very technical piece of work, but one that is now robust and transferable elsewhere.

**Being responsive to research**

The FPA programme allowed the project team to be very responsive and evolve and change as opportunities arose. Although the programme did not set out to create an Environmental Justice Tool, it came out of the research and process, and became a very effective way the Council to see the city in a different light.
The City of Nature Alliance provides a new framework for greater citizen involvement and participation and will provide a vehicle for partner organisations to contribute to the delivery of the City of Nature Plan and to have a voice in this process. The development of the City of Nature Alliance, with Terms of Reference and a Memorandum of Understanding reflects a change from the original intent to investigate the establishment of a Foundation model. However, it is a model that reflects the local context and the scale of community engagement that already occurs in some parts of the city and provides an agreed vehicle to deliver greater change in the future.
City of Nature Alliance

**Project aims and objectives**

Birmingham City Council (BCC) aimed to establish an alliance of existing organisations to help deliver actions on the ground in parks with this becoming a city-wide approach to achieving environmental justice across Birmingham. The Birmingham City of Nature (BcoN) Alliance is the new vehicle for citizen engagement to help support the delivery of the City of Nature Plan.

The objectives of the BCON Alliance are to:

- Continue to identify organisations across Birmingham that deliver outcomes in line with the aims of the council’s 25 year plan for parks and invite them to join the Alliance membership to help with the delivery of actions.
- Establish and maintain a forum for BCoN Alliance members to come together.
- Communicate information between BCoN members, communities, and other stakeholders.
- Maintain relationships with people interested / involved with the project, including but not limited to volunteers.
- Help deliver opportunities for volunteers to be involved in site development and management not already resourced.
- Deliver educational establishment engagement not already resourced.
- Deliver community engagement activities.
- Identify Community Leads (Green Champions), who are individuals willing to train to lead community activities on a voluntary basis.
- Help to identify funding opportunities and investment to develop a sustainable funding model for the delivery framework including but not limited to, paying for assistance with bid writing for any established groups.
- Delivery of actions required to bring parks up to the Birmingham Fair Standard - even in areas that do not have established Friends of groups. The standard aims to increase environmental justice by improving the city’s parks offer to citizens.

**BCoN Alliance Vision**

"Working together with a growing community of passionate Green Champions, the City of Nature Alliance strives to ensure that all people are able to discover their own personal connections to parks and green spaces as places to meet, play, learn, grow, breathe, and enjoy nature – together. Because they don’t just stand for where Birmingham has been – they inspire us to see how we go forward."
Why was the project important?

Parks and green spaces, including blue infrastructure and water-based assets, provide considerable value. Together, these are sustaining the city’s biodiversity; improving and sustaining health & wellbeing; community cohesion & quality of life; as well as mitigating and adapting to climate change. However, access to green space across Birmingham is not equitable and some sections of the city’s diverse population of over 1 million people face barriers in accessing green spaces, participating in activities, or making full use of facilities on offer.

Birmingham is the first city in the UK to develop a tool to highlight the inequalities in accessing green space, health inequalities (through excess years of life lost), flood risk, urban heat island effect and the indices of multiple deprivation. The map identifies “red” wards which have the lowest environmental justice.

To address these inequalities and the significant challenges posed by climate change and further highlighted by Covid-19, the council recognised it needed to put in place new ways of working across the organisation. Climate change adaptation and addressing environmental justice will require new leadership and governance and action across the whole organisation. This will need to be backed by a new funding model based around developing sustainable funding from a range of sources.

A partnership approach with external organisations was seen as critical and so to underpin this the adoption of a new way to support communities to be more engaged through the Birmingham City of Nature Alliance was developed.

What was trialled and tested as part of the project?

During the co-design phase of the FPA programme the feasibility of the Parks Foundation and initial work to review options was undertaken. Engagement work was also undertaken with Birmingham Open Spaces Forum (BOSF), a network organisation that brings together all the community groups in Birmingham with an interest in green open spaces to support volunteers.

The FPA programme proposals originally included establishing a Parks Foundation charity. However, as a result of consulting with FPA partner organisations and considering feedback from public consultations, a collaborative alliance approach was concluded as being the best option for Birmingham to bring together the many organisations already operating in green spaces across the city. The Alliance would develop a new vehicle for collaborative working that builds upon existing structures and organisations and adds value to them and their outcomes. Proposals for an Alliance and how it could be effectively structured were refined during the transition phase of the programme.
Activities to engage people

Initial consultation with partners was undertaken during the co-design phase which resulted in the conclusion that an Alliance rather than a Parks Foundation was most appropriate for the City.

The process of establishing the Alliance took place via a series of workshops through spring/summer 2021. Partners were equally actively engaged and involved in how the Alliance should function and be structured and the next steps to take it forward.

By the end of summer 2021 a memorandum of understanding was drafted, and an action plan for establishing the Alliance was created, including having a project manager to facilitate a BCoN Alliance Establishment project in place by winter 2021.

Challenges and barriers

- Covid-19 – impacted ways of working and slowed some delivery, although this also offered opportunities for digital engagement
- Workstreams and pilots developing at different speeds
- Being responsive to new opportunities with limited resources and spinning lots of plates.
- Effective communication and time to develop relationships, both internally and externally.

BCC overcame these barriers by developing a series of digital workshops in place of in-person events, and drawing on the value of parks that was being highlighted during the pandemic to engage with partners and organisations.

Key achievements

The Alliance is now embedded in the Birmingham City of Nature 25 year plan as a policy “to provide a new civic voice and engagement mechanism.”

Evidence to show success

The Alliance has also begun work on applying the Birmingham Fair Parks Standard in one of the ‘red’ wards identified using the Environmental Justice. A five year action plan with costings has been developed. Following this pilot, the Alliance will work on increasing the quality of greenspaces in a further five red wards.
**Future plans and actions**

A BCoN Alliance Establishment Project has been developed to fund officer time in partner organisations to help develop the Alliance and deliver a framework for the city’s green spaces based on the five key themes of A Green City; A Healthy City; A fair City; An Involved City; and a Valued City.

This approach is being piloted initially in one of the “red” wards, Bordesley and Highgate Ward, identified in the Council’s Environmental Justice Audit. Funding has been secured from the Commonwealth Games Legacy fund for the further development of the Alliance Model and delivery of the pilot in the Bordesley and Highgate Ward. The next steps for members of the Alliance are to continue to work on the objectives of the Alliance and to achieve the following outcomes:

- Action plan for delivery of the pilot in Bordesley and Highgate Ward, including identification of existing resources to support delivery.
- Action plan for delivery in 5 other “red” wards.
- Identify, engage, and involve Green Champions for each of the parks in Bordesley and Highgate Ward. Green Champions are members of the community who will help deliver actions on site and or advocate for environmental justice and green spaces. They may be volunteers or professionals such as teachers who have a green focus.
  - Community Involvement activities with early years children and local schools.
  - Community involvement activities for individuals and families including Healthy Parks, walks, exercise, and mental health mindfulness activities.
  - Physical landscape improvements including wildflower areas and tree planting appropriate for each site – being developed through the action planning process.
  - Sustainable Finance Strategy to ensure there is funding to keep communications, engagement, volunteer point of contact and CRM in operation. A proposal of how the Alliance could raise money for the 5 subsequent wards to deliver some elements of place and people.
  - Communications Plan and delivery to engage local residents and businesses.

**Lessons Learnt**

**Building on pilots**

The pilot is allowing the Alliance to work out how partners will work together to deliver improvements on the ground and to evolve this before rolling it out and applying it to other Wards.

**Allowing for different starting points**

When forging partnerships and talking with members of the community, it was important to remember that not everyone is fully aware yet of the multiple benefits that parks can provide.

**Direction of communication**

The Alliance has needed to work across all hierarchies to connect into communities and change the usual direction of communication and decision making to find out what groups want and need.
The project can also demonstrate a commitment to engaging citizens and communities in thinking about what a City of Nature may comprise and providing an opportunity for highlighting the importance of green space to individuals. The Earth Stories project was particularly effective in reaching communities and individuals that do not usually respond to standard consultation techniques. These Earth Stories capture powerful personal connections to green space and nature and are a strong element running through the City of Nature Plan.

A Case Study about the Earth Stories project has been published on the Green Flag Award Resources Hub and can be found here.

The Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator project is part of an approach to find long term sustainable solutions to the management and funding of parks and green spaces. The Sustainable Finance Steering Group has sought to explore these concepts and turn thinking into a practical and deliverable financial model and can clearly demonstrate progress in scoping a Birmingham Sustainable Finance Framework and developing principles that support its application. The model has now been formally adopted by the Council and will guide longer term investment decisions and guide the delivery of large projects.

In the short-term there have been some positive achievements that the project can demonstrate with respect to funding. These include:

- Cabinet approval to invest £500,000 Community Infrastructure Levy Funding to the delivery of the City of Nature Plan in Bordesley and Highgate and the ‘top’ five red wards;
- £150,000 funding through the Commonwealth Games to support the development of greater volunteer participation and the infrastructure to support this as a legacy for the games;
- £10,000 seed funding for the City of Nature Alliance to secure additional external funding for local projects which has now been used to secure over £100,000.
- Proof of concept for a crowd funding project at Dawberry Fields that raised £2,360 for a project with the Wildlife Trust to create suitable habitat for slow worms;
- Agreement that sponsorship and commercial income generated through parks and green spaces can be reinvested into the service (rather than being directed to the centre);
- Development of wider sponsorship packages with the corporate team that will generate greater income for parks and green spaces;
- Work with procurement to develop a Social Responsibility Charter that will bring additional funding and help in-kind.
Getting the project established, starting up and managing the pilot projects has been challenging and this reflects the complexity of the programme and the breadth of activity that was planned and delivered. Having a small dedicated project team with systems to monitor progress, steer and deliver the project has been critical to its success.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the development and delivery of Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator has been significant. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic severely limited the ability to deliver face to face engagement, and activities as originally planned, with most switching to online delivery. Engaging with schools and education providers during Covid-19 was not possible. However, Covid-19 highlighted the value of green space and need to provider greater equality of access and environmental justice across the city.

Stakeholders have spoken about the need to recognise and be responsive to new opportunities, if they appear to offer promise and are a good fit with the overall vision. With a small team and limited resource there is the need to focus on delivery of the agreed outputs but to also be responsive to emerging opportunities.

The FPA project was being delivered whilst the Council was undergoing a radical reorganisation from the top down and the whole organisation appeared to be in a state of flux. To have developed the City of Nature Plan, have this adopted and find a ‘home’ within Housing and Inclusive Growth is a significant achievement.

Language and terminology have been raised by some participants and stakeholders as having been a barrier to participation, particularly in relation to the Children’s Pilot. Whilst many of the terms are commonly used their meaning is open to interpretation and sometimes percep-

What Have Been the Challenges?

tions and understanding of terms was off-putting. For example “we had to look at the wording we were using because if I was to say to a twelve year old what does green space Finding simple ways to communicate what the project is about and what it is seeking to achieve has been challenging. The complexity of the project, the focus on exploring new ways of working without a well defined ‘end’ presented some issues but the project has focused on ‘winning hearts and minds’ and building a wider team of Green Champions. The Earth Stories project was particularly successful in generating a high level of response from the city’s diverse communities.

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator has sought to change the culture and the structure of the Council and to build external support to deliver long term positive change. There is evidence that the project has developed a cohort of ‘Green Champions’ across the Council and partner organisations and there are now more people seeking to improve and enhance parks and green spaces as a direct result of the project. However, there remains more work to across the Council to develop policies and procedures (supported by appropriate financial valuation and management tools) to develop better place based solutions that recognise eco-system services and deliver Green Infrastructure benefits and deliver nature recovery.

Further work continues to put in place delivery structures within the Council. The timetable for the restructure of the parks service has been extended, in order to allow more time to examine what a stronger, better resourced and more responsive service may look like and to allow engagement in this process with staff. This is an important element of the Future Parks Accelerator project and one that will be crucial in embedding the future strategy within the organisation.
Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator can clearly demonstrate that through the Transition Phase the project has developed plans for the future and that these are embedded within Birmingham City Council and partner organisations. The learning gained as part of the Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator project now forms part of a new governance model for the natural environment, the City of Nature Plan which was adopted by Birmingham City Council in February 2022.

The City of Nature Plan is a direct response to the City of Nature theme within the Council’s Our Future City Plan 2040. It goes beyond just parks to encompass all aspects of the natural environment in the city and people’s engagement with it. This becomes a major strand within the Route to Zero Climate Emergency Plan and represents a substantive part of the city’s adaptation response to climate change.

Naturally Birmingham Future Parks Accelerator was led by the project team located within Birmingham City Council Public Health. This was a short term measure to facilitate the delivery of the accelerator project. The City of Nature Plan is now ‘owned’ by Housing and Inclusive Growth alongside the Our Future City Plan, however delivery of the City of Nature requires a partnership approach with other service areas and external partners. The partnership approach is underpinned by the development of the City of Nature Alliance bringing together key voluntary and community based organisations across the city.

What is the Project Legacy?
A new governance structure has been developed to oversee the delivery of the City of Nature.

It is intended that this will strengthen the profile and recognition of Birmingham as a City of Nature and provide a mechanism to oversee its implementation and delivery. With the additional capacity brought through this arrangement, coupled with the new sustainable finance model - it is anticipated that these system changes will enable the council and its partners to work together to implement the City of Nature Delivery Framework; both within existing resources initially; but gradually drawing in new resources to expand and accelerate the programme over time.

In terms of delivery, the City of Nature Plan is currently being implemented in Bordesley and Highgate ward to test the tools and develop effective implementation mechanisms and to develop social capacity.
Acknowledgements

CFP would like to thank everyone that has contributed their time and views in supporting the evaluation process. This End of Project Evaluation Report has been carried out based on the following sources of information:

- NBFPA Evaluation Framework;
- Project Outputs across the Pilot Projects and all other areas;
- Quantitative project data;
- New primary data gathered through the project
- Responses to public engagement work delivered through the project;
- 1-2-1 Interviews with members of the Project Team, Parks Service, Senior Officers across the Council, Elected Members, Partner Organisations and the national FPA team;
- Observation and outputs from workshops delivered across key workstreams;
- Mid-Point Review Reports and documentation;
- Review of lessons learned captured throughout the project delivery.

The End of Project Evaluation Report draws upon data and research carried out across the project by the project team, GP Trainees on Public Health placements with Birmingham City Council and by consultants CFP.