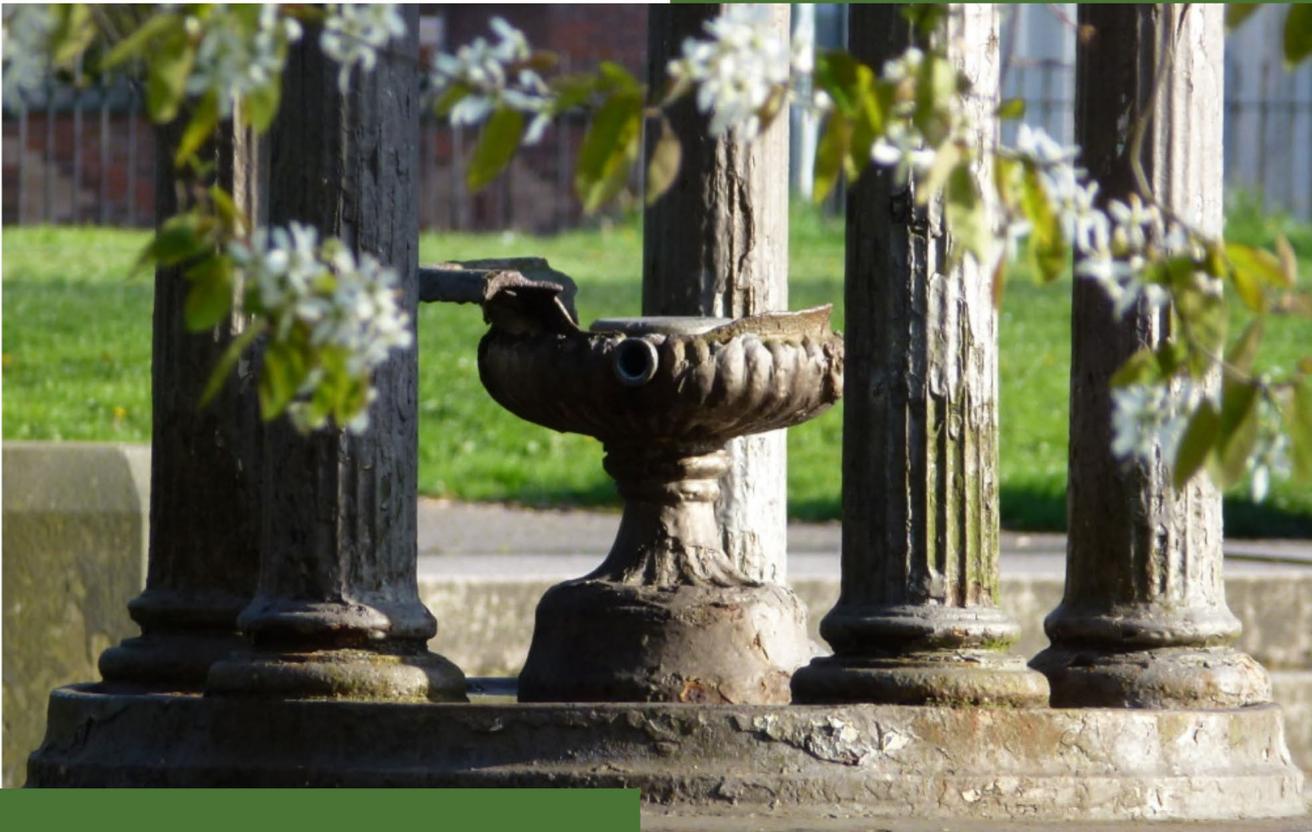


# A Victorian Park's Renaissance: Alexandra Park, Manchester



**Stephen Parkes**

October 2020

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## Summary

Alexandra Park is a Victorian era park with a rich heritage and it has provided an important area of greenspace for residents in South Manchester for 150 years. Following several decades of neglect and a lack of investment, in 2012 it was awarded £2.2 million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund's Parks for People Programme to enable its restoration. This was supplemented by an additional £2.3 million of match-funding to help transform it from a neglected space to a thriving park serving the local community.

The project involved the physical restoration of the park through a capital works programme, which included transforming derelict buildings back in to use, updating and adding to sports facilities, and creating managed planting and woodland. These works took place mainly in 2013 and 2014. A subsequent programme of community engagement was then undertaken through the Activity Plan, which included the introduction of four community forums: Wildlife, Arts and Culture, Heritage, and the Sports Alliance.

The park now occupies an important place at the heart of the community. It is regarded as an invaluable piece of greenspace and attracts a diverse range of users on a regular basis. This report examines how the investment in the park has contributed to the following six areas of social value:

- Involving the community
- Improving health and wellbeing
- Bringing people together
- Engaging with nature and the environment
- Reducing inequalities
- Supporting the local economy

The report identifies several learning points:

- Whilst costly, the restoration of existing buildings and infrastructure provides invaluable facilities for users; they provide a base for community and volunteer groups, provide space for businesses to utilise, and have opened the park up to countless more users.
- The presence of a dedicated Park Development Officer was critical to ensuring there was sufficient capacity to develop community buy-in.
- It is important to safeguard heritage whilst also bringing the park into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In offering a diverse range of events but also showcasing its rich history the Alexandra Park has become a space for people from all walks of life to thrive in.
- Finding a balance between formal events that generate vital income and the more informal activities that draw in diverse users has been a key part of its success; it is a space that offers something for (almost) everyone.
- The park has not succeeded in providing something for everyone and there remain some small gaps in provision in the park (for both younger and older users). Targeted interventions for these groups may help to ensure the park offers something for everyone.

- With such a transformative intervention, conflict may arise with existing stakeholders in the park. How the aims of the project are communicated to the broader user base at the beginning may help to alleviate this.
- The activity plan for the park, which focused on developing the four community forums, was developed at the bid stage. Whilst this gave clarity to the steps that would be taken to embed the community in decision making and activities, the subsequent failure to develop distinctive and thriving community forums suggests the prescribed nature was not entirely effective.
- The long-standing Friends of Alexandra Park occupy a difficult and sometimes poorly defined role in the park. They are neither a dedicated community forum focused on specific activities (as with the four different activity forums) yet they do not provide oversight and steer for the park, a role taken on by the recently introduced Community Governance Board. More clarity from the beginning of the longer-term governance structures and where responsibility lies would have helped to address this.

## Introduction

### About Alexandra Park

Alexandra Park sits a short way to the south of Manchester City Centre and has a rich heritage as a fine example of a Victorian era park. It was the first public park in South Manchester, providing the local community with respite from the polluted city and a space to access nature, play sports, and breathe fresh air. 2020 is Alexandra's 150th year serving the people of Manchester. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that this landmark year looked a little different. The extensive celebrations to mark the anniversary were largely cancelled and curtailed. However, this difficult year also helped to demonstrate the enduring value of spaces such as this park with respite continuing to be provided to the local community in the face of national and local 'lockdowns', the closure of many facilities and shops, and requests to work from home for those that can.

Alexandra Park is located on the borders of Whalley Range, Moss Side, and Fallowfield. Being an old industrial area of the city, many houses have only limited gardens, or none at all, and the park serves an important role as a primary piece of greenspace for many local residents. In recent decades, improvements had been made to these surrounding areas to address a range of social problems that had historically characterised them. Despite this, as the Evaluation Report produced by the Park Development Officer summarises, the park was left behind:

*'...it suffered years of neglect – caused by ever shrinking Council budgets. The buildings had become derelict and covered in steel shutters. Paths were potholed and in areas, completely overgrown with self-seeded vegetation. Victorian design features were hard to make out, with any metal work such as the fountain and flagstaff rusted, broken and graffitied. By 2000 it felt abandoned and unloved. In particular the stigma left over from associations with the gang culture, contributed to fears that the Park was not safe to use, especially after dark.'*

In 2012, The National Lottery Heritage Fund<sup>1</sup> and The National Community Fund, through the Parks for People project provided a £2.2 million grant to the park. By

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the grant, this organisation was known as the Heritage Lottery Fund, but for consistency we have used the organisation's current name throughout our Parks for People reports.

successfully drawing on other sources of investment, a total of £4.5 million was raised to help turnaround the fortunes of the park. The aims of the bid were to:

- Create a safe, welcoming park with good, accessible facilities.
- Increase the number of people using the park through opportunities for relaxation, recreation, learning, sport and for bringing communities together.
- Increase community engagement in the park and put park users at the heart of decision making.
- Promote care of the park through conservation and appreciation of its historical landscape.

## The park and the local area

Alexandra Park covers 60-acres just a few miles to the south of Manchester City Centre. It was created by the city of Manchester for the local people, offering valuable greenspace in a busy, industrial city. It opened in 1870 and was designed by Alexander Hennell.

The design of the park itself is one of two halves, although more by its purpose rather than specific physical design. The park was designed to integrate the ornamental features typical of Victorian era parks. Features such as a raised terrace, serpentine lake, formal walk, cricket pavilion, flagstaff and drinking fountain gifted to the Park by The Band of Hope (a local temperance movement) speak to the formal designs of such parks and the rich heritage of Alexandra Park. Interestingly, and innovatively for its time, the original design of the park also included a range of sporting facilities. This integration of the formal and informal endures today and the sporting element of the park is a key recent success story.

Alexandra Park is located just off Princess Road, which runs directly south from Manchester's City Centre. To its North is Moss Side, an area with a historic reputation for crime and challenging social problems. To its south east is Fallowfield, an area dominated by the city's large student population. The park itself sits just within the northwest corner of Whalley Range, a neighbourhood that has also faced social problems in the past.

Whilst the local areas are regarded as having improved in recent decades there remain challenges. Data shows that the area's the park serves are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> decile of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, or put differently, they are amongst the 30 per cent of neighbourhoods in England that have the highest levels of deprivation.

Life expectancy in the Whalley Range ward is well below the national average. For males, life expectancy is 74.9 compared to 79.5 in England; for females it is 79.9 against a national average of 83.1. At the last census, nearly a third of those in Whalley Range were aged over 65 and living alone; 15.6 per cent of the residents had a long-term limiting illness or disability.

Despite the gradual improvements over recent decades to the fortunes of the local neighbourhood, the park itself fared rather differently owing to a lack of investment. It had not kept up with the changes in the area and by the turn of the century it had become a far less desirable place to be and a destination that only some locals and dog walkers would tend to venture to. As one interviewee reflected:

*'Before the grant, before the changes, Alex Park had a mystique that it was a dangerous place and people didn't go in it. A lot of people said to me 'Oh I never*

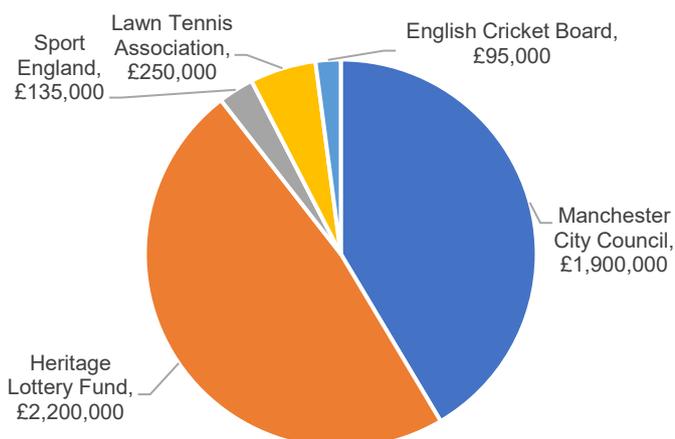
*go in there, it's full of people taking drugs'...and yet people did use it before the regeneration but usually if it was a definite activity like an organised cricket match or a football match...the wardens did do their best but most people didn't use it and there were a lot of people afraid of the park.'*

## About the restoration project

The turnaround in the park's fortunes began with a concerted effort to secure much needed funding to restore the park to its former glory. The story of change began slowly. The 'Friends of Alexandra Park' group was set up in 2001 by a group of park users with support from Manchester Council. Things began small with activities and events held to generate interest in the park. Two unsuccessful bids for The National Lottery Heritage Fund grants were followed by a successful bid in 2012 that brought together the community in a concerted effort to radically address the park's situation.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund provided £2.2 million of investment into Alexandra Park. This was supported by further investment from other sources, notably £1.9 million from Manchester City Council and £250,000 from the Lawn Tennis Association. In total, £4.5 million was raised for the restoration of the park. Beyond the investments from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and the City Council, the contributions from Sport England, the English Cricket Board, and the Lawn Tennis Association demonstrates the perceived potential sporting offer of the park and reflects its history as a destination for sports teams.

### £4.5 million in total was raised for the restoration project



Source: Alexandra Park Evaluation Report.

To achieve the objectives of the funding, two strands of work were undertaken. Firstly, the capital works programme delivered the physical restoration of the park. This included a range of improvements, sensitive to the heritage of the features of the park, and succinctly summarised in the Alexandra Park Evaluation Report<sup>2</sup>, which was produced by the Park Development Officer. This physical programme of work was completed in 2014.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Park Evaluation Report. This was produced in 2018 by the Park Development Officer for Alexandra Park with support from Pathways Consultancy. It is not currently available online.

- Updated the historic entrances by installing new cast iron gates replicated from the original design; repainting railings; and repairing the boundary wall.
- Reintroduced the original raised terrace and formal walk by creating new footpaths; restoring stone steps; and reintroducing the urns along with ornamental shrubs and extensive flower beds.
- Restored and reintroduced the Park's network of paths, based on the original design.
- Restored the Pavilion and brought it back into community use with the introduction of a cafe, changing rooms and a flexible community space.
- Restored Chorlton Lodge, brought it back into community use with an information area, offices, kitchen, and flexible meeting space.
- Restored the stone steps to the bowling green.
- Replaced all the park furniture with matching bins, benches, signage and interpretation panels.
- Repaired and rebuilt the edge of the lake, including introducing new fishing pegs, creating a new planting scheme and technical work undertaken on the overflow and inflow chamber.
- Created new, high quality sports facilities including four flood lit tennis courts, a cricket oval with 10 grass pitches and an artificial multiuse games pitch.
- Planted trees that were missing from the original design and reintroduced the flower garden.

The restoration covered three distinctive areas of the park: The **Community Zone** included much of the grassed and sports areas, playground, pavilion, and café. The **Natural Zone** was the woodland area along with the perimeter of the park where the grass was encouraged to grow longer. Finally, the **Heritage Zone**, included the north end of the park where the raised terrace, lodge and formal gardens are located. The need for the project and investment in the physical fabric of the park is clear from the reflection given by the Park Development Officer from 2012-2017.

*'It had a bad reputation, there were a lot of self-seeded trees, it was overgrown, it wasn't well maintained and it didn't have the facilities that would make a park feel like a community hub...it was still well loved, it was still used for runners and dog walkers. When I first got the job I had a walk around it and it was quite, oppressive is a strong word but it was quite intimidating at four o'clock in the afternoon. There were corners you couldn't see behind, there were bricked up buildings, overgrown tennis courts that clearly weren't being used. The facilities had once been there and were still decaying in place but it didn't feel, it didn't feel safe as a lone woman walking in a park it didn't feel safe to me.'*

The second element of the work funded was delivered through an activity plan, which was a key element of the bid to The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. The phase was focused more on people and on creating community groups, or forums to drive forward the integration of the local community into the park's future. This was motivated by a perceived requirement in the funding to place the community at the heart of the decision making for the park. Four forums were identified in the bid stage and were then realised once the project was underway. These included:

- The Wildlife Forum
- The Arts and Culture Forum

- The Heritage Forum
- The Sports Alliance

The activity plan was seen as a way of widening participation in the park and drawing in more people from across the community. The diverse nature of the four groups in the activity plan represent a push to ensure that all areas that were deemed necessary of improvement, were represented from a governance perspective. The Park Development Officer recounted:

*'Here was really about building ownership and really about...not doing to people but doing with people. ...We've got a really strong friends group that were here before my time so it's about building on that, diversifying that because they were very interested in heritage, they still are very interested in heritage, but they weren't particularly bothered about our ecological side of things, or our natural side of things so it was just marrying those up. Then our sports users who were primarily focused on our sports facilities just wanted a cricket pitch. So it was about creating a whole park ethos, that sense of ownership and I think we did it quite well.'*

The community forums were designed to cover the key activities being, or anticipated to be, undertaken in the park. The groups were driven initially by the City Council but designed to be ultimately forums for the local community to take ownership of. The contributions of the different groups are explored in subsequent sections; however, one key output of the Heritage Forum was the commissioning of a video that documents the history of the park and was published in 2017<sup>3</sup>.

## What happened after the restoration?

The investment through the Parks for People project brought about both a significant visual transformation to Alexandra Park alongside a notable expansion of governance activities. With the physical restoration complete and towards the end of the Parks for People funding, a Community Governance Board was set up. This did not replace the 'Friends of Alexandra Park' group - which has continued to provide a wide-ranging contribution to the park and a further link to the local community – but instead sought to further cement the governance and oversight around the park. The Community Governance Board includes representatives from the different community forums, council staff, and local elected members.

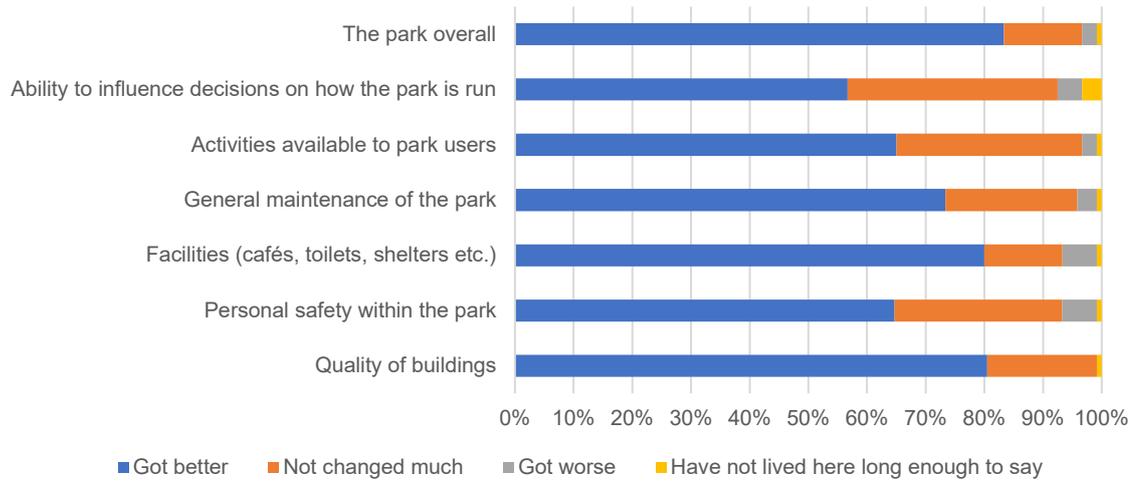
The use of the park itself has grown considerably since the restoration. Conversations with stakeholders and park users paint a picture of wide-ranging engagement by people from a variety of backgrounds, and for a diverse set of uses. The impact of the restoration of Alexandra Park will be explored in further detail in the remainder of this case-study.

As part of this evaluation a user survey was distributed, which generated 163 responses from local residents. Only 14% of respondents were not aware of the Parks for People project in Alexandra Park. In contrast, 44% were 'very' aware of the project. 74% of respondents had used the park for at least 5 years (120 respondents). The chart below includes responses from this specific cohort as their use of the park aligns closest with the Parks for People restoration, which was completed in 2014.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Park: A short history of a people's park. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/231925973>.

**A majority of user survey respondents felt the park had improved within the last ten years.**



Source: Survey conducted by Evaluation Team.

The survey indicates how over 80% of respondents felt the park had improved overall. Specifically, the quality of buildings, facilities, and the general maintenance of the park were elements that nearly three-quarters (or more) respondents felt had improved. Whilst other elements, such as personal safety in the park or ability to influence decisions were regarded as having improved by slightly fewer respondents, there was a clear consensus that the restoration has had a hugely positive impact on the park.

## Involving the community

Everyone you speak to about the park talks about the diverse community that lives in the surrounding streets. Importantly, they also report how this diversity is also seen in the range of users engaging with the park and in the activities they undertake. One member of the Park's Heritage Group recounted a story from their friend, a linguist, who, on spending an hour in the playground with her child had reported hearing 15 different languages, marvelling in the diversity of people welcomed into the park.

The diversity of people also reflects the diversity of activities that are undertaken in the park. It is very clearly a place that welcomes all. Whether it is the formal, organised activities such as cricket, tennis training, Parkrun, wildlife walks, car boot sales, birds of prey demonstrations, or the more informal activities that have organically grown from the Park's restoration, including, tai chi, and the 5-a-side football tournament held by the local Muslim community during Ramadan, know colloquially as the Ramadan Cup.

Related to the desire to be a diverse park, there have also been efforts to ensure the park is inclusive. For example, during the capital works stage of the Parks for People project, the Park was designed as 'Age Friendly' to enable older users or those with limited mobility to access the park. On a practical level, this involved things such as installing benches that were more accessible for the elderly. It has also enabled the park to become a venue for organised activities such as health walks. These have been coordinated by external organisations such as Buzz Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service and Age UK. There have also been efforts to better involve younger members of the community in the park, and much of this has been through work with local schools. A nice example is linked to the 150-year anniversary in the park and summarised by a member of the Heritage Group.

*'The Heritage Group in particular wanted to do work in schools and one of the projects we had was that we went to [a local] Sixth Form College and they would get some young people, each to take a decade and then do a mock speakers corner, because protest in the park has been a big theme of the park and we wanted to recreate the speakers corner as part of the [anniversary] event...and [the college] were really up for that...and then of course it all stopped [due to COVID-19] but one of the young people took her topic and turned it into an essay and sent it off and won one of the Orwell Youth Prize's<sup>4</sup>*

Engagement with the community has not always been positive and the main area of contention appears to be where existing events or features of the park faced potential disruption. During the restoration stage of the project there was some significant conflict over the removal of older, established trees as part of the capital works. The removal of these trees was justified because they were argued to have been planted outside of the original design of the park and not in keeping with it or were trees that had self-seeded over the decades. Their removal was also planned to help improve perceptions of safety in the park; many stakeholders and users recalled feelings of vulnerability in the park prior to the restoration when the 'sightlines' were restricted by the unmanaged trees.

The conflict over the tree felling was, at times, perceived to be so severe that it threatened the overall success of the project: *'I thought at one point we might lose the HLF money because...you know, if we can't...if people don't want to take the trees*

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<sup>4</sup> Rosaleen Tite Ahern (2020) Streets in the Sky. Available at: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-youth-prize/2018-youth-prize/winners-orwell-youth-prize-2020/rosaleen-tite-ahern/>

*down then we're not going to return that historical infrastructure'*. The extent of this conflict led to protestors occupying the park to prevent the felling of the trees<sup>5</sup>. Ultimately, compromises were made and the tree felling proceeded, albeit slightly scaled back<sup>6</sup>, and the project was able to continue. The Park Development Officer reflected that they believed the resolution of this issue was aided, in part, by the overall strength of the plan for the Park's restoration and the vision that had been outlined.

The user survey conducted as part of this evaluation asked park users about their ability to influence decisions on how the park is run and also whether they ever volunteered in the park. Nearly a third of respondents were either 'fairly' or 'very' satisfied with their ability to influence decisions. 55% of respondents were neither satisfied or dissatisfied, which suggests there is perhaps still some work to do to further engage local residents in decision making processes. 9% of respondents volunteered weekly or monthly in the park. In contrast, 71% of respondents never volunteered in the park indicating that a substantial number of respondents had very little involvement in the park beyond their use the space for activities.

Prior to the Parks for People project, the Friends of Alexandra Park were a key driving force behind much that went on in the park. Through the activity plan that was implemented as part of the Parks for People funding, the additional groups that were set up helped to expand this group. The contribution of these groups has been substantial. As one interviewee put it: *'They [the volunteer group] are really committed, they are in here, what, at least two three times a week, they would do above 20 hours a week volunteering for us'*. However, they also cautioned that there are improvements that could be made to the representation of these groups 'it's a small, tight group and that still needs to expand and grow and be more reflective of our community but it's a really good starting point'.

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<sup>5</sup> BBC (2013) Tree protesters spend night in Alexandra Park. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-21289875>

<sup>6</sup> BBC (2013) Alexandra Park tree felling scaled back following protests. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-21491870>

## Improving health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of the local community has clearly been a key benefit of the funding. With Alexandra Park's history of sport, it was perhaps inevitable that health and wellbeing would feature so strongly. This was also reflected in the additional funding that was secured from Sport England, the Lawn Tennis Association, and the English Cricket Board, valued at nearly £400,000.

The capital works of the Parks for People project helped to restore and expand the sporting facilities available in the park. This included:

- A full-sized football pitch
- Mown ovals of grassed that could be used informally for football;
- 10 grassed cricket pitches and one artificial cricket pitch
- 2.5k of ringed paths suitable for walking, running and roller skating, and five marked running routes;
- Four flood lit tennis courts
- Two suites of fully accessible changing facilities
- A historic tree lined avenue for walkers to enjoy

The project's 'Activity Plan' included the creation of the 'Sports Alliance' group. The purpose of this group was simple, as described by the Park Development Officer for the project:

*'The idea was to get health and wellbeing and sports activities all together so they are not competing for funding, that we're talking about how we use the space, and that we can support each other and become one park rather than fighting about changing rooms and things like that.'*

With the park's sporting heritage and key features of the Parks for People being to enhance the sporting provision and activity in the park, there was clearly pressure for sport to flourish in Alexandra Park once the restoration was complete. The result was that a range of sports and activities now take place in the Park. This includes cricket, football, running, tennis, cycling, walking, volleyball boot camps, yoga, tai chi, health walks. The users are also diverse, for example, the park is home to annual events such as the Ramadan Cup and a Gambian Football Festival.

The inclusiveness of the Health and Wellbeing offer of the park is highlighted by examples of new users coming to the park to improve their own health. This includes the GP who 'refers' patients for walks around the park to improve their wellbeing, or groups who use the space for light exercise, for instance:

*'Several of them [local South Asian community] are also quite keen on keeping a bit fitter and use the park to make sure that they can do that. So you get Muslim women of all ages doing that...going up the steps and coming down again and they do that in groups of two, three or four...and the feedback is that...this is their park...they feel comfortable there.'*

Insights from the user survey conducted as part of this evaluation indicate that over three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that the park has helped to improve their levels of physical activity. Similarly, 77% of respondents felt that park had helped

to improve their mental health. Over half of respondents indicated that the park has helped them to overcome feelings of isolation. These findings highlight the vitally important role Alexandra Park has on the health and wellbeing of its users.

One sporting activity that has continued to be popular and has benefited from the wider restoration of the park - rather than a specific piece of infrastructure, such as the cricket pitch – is running. Specifically, the presence of a timed 5km run held in the park. Between 2005 and 2017 there was a monthly timed 5km run organised by a local LGBT running group. This was prior to the development of the formal ‘parkrun’ format now widely popular. The Evaluation Report written by the Park Development Officer provides a reflection from one of the run’s organisers, Anna Verges, *‘it put the park on the map. We got great feedback and I hope that it helped shift and dispel that bad reputation the park had...’*. Whilst this organised run closed in 2017, in 2019 parkrun arrived in the park with the Alexandra parkrun<sup>7</sup>. This was preceded by Junior Parkrun, which although both have now been curtailed by COVID-19 for the time being, the arrival of parkrun is a signal of the increased popularity of sport in the park and the impact of the investment on the health and wellbeing of the local community.

The physical restoration of the Chorley Lodge has helped to create a space that has been used at times to deliver important health and wellbeing services. In recent times, two different NHS mental health services have utilised the space in the lodge to provide mental health groups and counselling services. This shows how the park can help to provide a link between formal (i.e. NHS services) and informal (i.e. access to greenspace and nature) health and wellbeing opportunities for the local community. The Pavilion, which is primarily used as a café space, also hosts other community facing events, including a ‘Together Dementia Support Group’.

When asked to reflect on where the project might have had most impact, the local councillor responded simply: *‘I think the health and wellbeing one is really the main one. I think it’s a place which makes people feel happy and connected’*.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.parkrun.org.uk/alexandra/>

## Bringing people together

The Activity Plan outlined in the Parks for People bid had the purpose of widening participation in the park and the evidence indicates there has been success in achieving this. Insights gained from speaking to various stakeholders provides a view on the diversity of people engaging with the park and the range of activities they are undertaking. One interviewee described a culture change and new willingness for people to travel to and spend time in the park.

*'I think just the fact that people are going, and talking about it, and going to events in the park has kind of changed the culture around it... It's become a place of destination. You can say to people let's meet in the café in the park and therefore people do go and use the café and meet their friends.'*

A recent survey carried out by the Alexandra Park Governance Board helped to show the main reasons why people were visiting the park. Of the 100 visitors surveyed, 30% were visiting the park simply to spend time there, 34% were going for specific events, and a further 10% were visiting with their children to play. 4% were visiting the café, and the remaining 22% visited for other reasons. This highlights how the park appears to meet a range of needs amongst users, and how users seek out both formal and informal activities.

The restoration of the park has helped generate opportunities for people to spend time in the park. It has created a safe space that attracts users from across the local area and beyond. Our user survey found that for over half of respondents the park has helped to address feelings of isolation from others. For some users, changes in their own lives have led them to find solitude and support from the park. One stakeholder recounted the story of their neighbours' experience:

*'There's a guy called Tom<sup>8</sup>...his wife is in a care home and he can't go and visit her now [due to COVID-19] so he now comes and sits on a bench in the park from about 10 till 3 and looks at the ducks. And the number of people...I can't get to speak to him now...because people, you know he waves at them and they come over to talk to him. So he's found a way in which he can relate to this random mass of people who are wandering around the park because he knows if he goes and sits on that bench and he waves at people they'll come and talk to him.'*

The diverse groups of users engaging with the park is an example of the inclusivity that has been sought in this project. There has clearly been a significant improvement in perceptions of safety in the park and this has in turn helped to bring people together. The local councillor highlighted how those who may have been previously excluded due to safety concerns are now spending time in the park.

*'We have groups of women from the Fallowfield/Moss Side side of the park...during the summer there are quite large groups of women...come into the park and walk about, sit down, chatter, just be with each other, and feel safe doing it, which is important.'*

The impact that the project has had on drawing the community together is clear when speaking to one stakeholder about how the park helps to address loneliness and isolation:

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<sup>8</sup> His name has been changed to protect his identity.

*'If you come out for a walk by yourself because you're feeling lonely, you will be able to speak to somebody. And so, in a way, the ambiance of the park, the safety of it...the fact that you can probably sit at the pavilion and have a drink, and also the fact that the people in the park, the regulars in the park, are friendly and using it like their back garden...The huge lift that's been given to the park by the funding has greatly contributed to that.'*

## Engaging with nature and the environment

The physical restoration of the park has brought to life many of the original features of the park, the Victorian promenade, the lime walk, and the fishing lake. These features, long neglected, offer an important link to nature for many users. In addition to restoring the original parts of the park, the investment has helped to enhance the environment in the park through the creation of nature trails, a biodiversity masterplan, and new interventions to directly support the wildlife in the park. The Wildlife Forum was set up to help protect and promote nature and wildlife within the park. This group was prescribed in the original Activity Plan although it has struggled to attract members.

Despite the challenge of establishing a strong governance structure around this aspect of the park, there have been a range of activities that have helped to engage users with nature. Much of this activity has been driven by the Friends of Alexandra Park group and the Governance Board. This has included a range of 'walks', including bat, bird, and tree. There has also been bulb and tree planting, and the local schools are frequent users of the park in order to help engage their pupils with nature. The value of this cannot be underestimated. The local councillor reflected:

*'It's the closest you come to nature for an awful lot of children who don't go anywhere very much, outside of the city. Many don't even go into the city centre. So the park is more important for the youngsters in that respect and they do learn about nature and appreciate it.'*

The users we spoke to consistently cited the significant enjoyment they found spending time in the park and benefitting from the greenspace and connection to nature. One user, who lives in Moss Side, told us how Alexandra Park wasn't their nearest park but they chose to travel to it with their young child because of what the park offered. The user survey we conducted found that for 79% of respondents, the park has helped to improve their connection to nature.

The fishing lake is a key feature that has benefitted from the investment, and in turn, this has benefitted those that engage with it. Many of those we spoke to highlighted the transformation of the lake as a significant step. They spoke of the re-emergence of fish in the lake, being able to sit and watch the heron. One stakeholder reflected on how the investment in the park had helped people connect to nature:

*'I think the renovation of the lake has been fairly key to that...it has attracted wildlife certainly, and the vegetation around the lake has been greatly improved, the planting around the lake. I'd say the lake is the focus for wildlife and so families observe there.'*

The conflict over tree felling that occurred in the early days of the Parks for People project reflects the reverence often shown towards trees and woodland, and the contribution they make to connecting us with nature. This connection remains strong within Alexandra Park and there are on-going efforts to protect and replenish the trees for future generations. A recent initiative was undertaken to plant 15 new trees in the park, including ten replacements for trees on the lime walk, which were lost to recent storms.

The investment from Parks for People has also given space for more recent ideas to be implemented in the park. A wildflower meadow has created space for nature to flourish but also engage users with nature as they explore the park.

*'They notice the wild flowering at the top...you see people wandering through the wildflower meadow, just looking at all the different species, so the fact that that is properly seeded [and] looked after, then mown down at the end of the year, ready to reseed for the next year. That's a dedicated area.'*

## Reducing inequalities

The investment in Alexandra Park has sought to create a more inclusive and welcoming space for the local community. The park sits broadly at the intersection of three neighbourhoods: Whalley Range, Moss Side, and Fallowfield. This area of Manchester has historic social problems and, whilst this has improved in recent years, the area is still within the most deprived 30% of neighbourhoods in England.

It is difficult to say whether the investment has directly contributed to reducing inequalities across the local community. A key impact of the investment in the park, a point repeated by many interviewees, is that the park is now used by a far wider range of people. This includes people from different cultural backgrounds; both younger and older generations; and people with a range of physical mobilities. Active steps were taken through the project to make the park a safer and more inclusive place, and thereby aim to reduce inequalities. This includes:

- Planning the park to be 'Age Friendly', which includes installing benches that are designed to be more comfortable, easier to get up from, and placed at strategic points around the park.
- Removing trees and undergrowth to improve the sightlines across the park and help users feel safer when in the park, particularly early in the morning or later in the day. This action was cited across all our interviews as being a key factor in making the park feel safer.
- Creating and enabling a programme of events that appeals to a broad range of users. From dementia and nature walks, to the Caribbean Carnival<sup>9</sup> and Windrush commemorations<sup>10</sup> the park has become a hive of diverse activities.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://themanchestercarnival.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/gallery/windrush-70-event-alexandra-park-14823667>

## Supporting the local economy

The restoration of the park has provided direct opportunities to support the local economy and for job creation. One key contributor to this was the transformation of the Pavilion, which is one of only two original park buildings remaining (the other being Chorlton Lodge). It had suffered significantly over many decades of neglect. The Parks for People project enabled a full restoration of the Pavilion and for it to be brought back into public use. Alongside changing facilities for sports teams and a flexible community space, the restored Pavilion created a space for a café to be introduced into the park.

The café space is tendered out and is currently home to the Coffee Cranks Cooperative<sup>11</sup>. The café is popular amongst users, providing a space to meet up and spend time. It hosts film nights, community events, and is home to a range of different community groups, including the 'Together Dementia Support Group', Chess Club, and a Crafters' Group. The café also hosts a rotating exhibition of the work from local artists and can also be hired out for private functions. One stakeholder summarised the opportunity the restoration of the Pavilion has created for economic activity in the park:

*'I think that the Pavilion is a good study there because I think that the availability of this good premises, beautifully renovated premises, with modern facilities inside has meant that the...catering arrangements there have become of a much higher standard so there's much more money flowing through the pavilion...[through] Coffee Cranks...so that's a good example of whereby, albeit small, but there's a fair amount of money flowing through there.'*

Bike Hive<sup>12</sup> is a further success story from the park and one that was consistently highlighted by the people we spoke to. It is a community bike project and inclusive cycling club based in Alexandra Park. Their aims are to connect members of the local community who are interested in cycling in all forms help to grow the number of people taking part. They provide several services, including repairing and reselling old bikes, bicycle repair by qualified mechanics, and bike hire in the park.

Another beneficiary of the opening up of Alexandra Park as a safe and inviting location are individuals who are able to utilise the space to generate economic activity. Alongside the traditional ice-cream van in the summer months, the park is also now used by several individuals to host fitness classes:

*'The availability of good quality public space, which can be used by people to earn their income. I mean these fitness groups, they all pay money. And so when a fitness group comes in and uses the park and you get ten people standing around a guy who's teaching them how to do exercises...that guy is making his living by doing that so there is quite a...I think it is a very useful way of using public space by making it available for people to come and do their business on.'*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://coffeecrankscoop.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.thebikehive.co.uk/>

## COVID-19

The UK lockdown, which resulted from the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, showcased the significant value that can be taken from parks and greenspaces. The story of the summer of 2020 was one of unprecedented utilisation of parks as places to safely escape the confines of home, to reconnect with family and friends, and to maintain health and wellbeing during a challenging time. Every person we spoke to had used the park much more because of the pandemic. It was particularly important for those with only small gardens or yards, a feature characteristic of some of the houses that surround the park.

Our conversations with stakeholders and users showed that the experience of Alexandra Park was no different. It became a haven for many during lockdown. The people we spoke to reflected on the influx of users: maximising their small windows of opportunity to exercise when restrictions were their tightest, meeting up safely with friends once they were allowed to do so, and then joining in again with sports after several months away. Informal sports and activities initially took centre stage as many of the formal events planned for 2020 were curtailed.

Speaking in September 2020, Alexandra's Park Ranger reflected on the dramatic shift in use during the summer:

*During COVID, formal activities obviously haven't happened but the level of sport, football over the last two, three months is actually greater than it has been in previous years, we've had a compressed cricket season but there is a lot more people exercising, especially cycling and jogging in the park, that was quite noticeable in the last probably three months. In the park generally, in the last three months has probably had 30 or 40 per cent increased numbers.*

COVID-19 also generated a shift in when users were in the park.

*'Alex Park has tended to be an afternoon and evening park, quietest in the morning but since COVID we've found that there's a lot more people in during the morning and that's probably reflecting the numbers of people who are working from home.'*

A key challenge faced during the summer of 2020 was maintaining the visual appearance of the park and keeping things running whilst faced with a huge influx of visitors to the park. The 30 to 40 per cent increase in park use during the summer generated far more issues that are typical with regard to wear and tear of the facilities, levels of litter in the park, and the need to empty bins at far greater frequency than usual. This placed the small team in Alexandra Park under far greater pressure. Resources were made available from the City Council in the form of additional time for grounds maintenance and more bin emptying to help keep on top of levels of litter. It was also a chance for the local community to show itself at its best with users organising litter picking sessions to help the park staff keep on top of the litter that accumulated during the busiest days during lockdown. This was often done independent of the Park team and demonstrates the ownership some users were willing to take on to support the park both during COVID but also generally.

Despite the increased popularity of the park as a destination in 2020, which demonstrated its significant value to the local community, the pandemic has also exacerbated existing challenges facing the park. Much of this was around lost income. The park relies on the hosting of events in its park (e.g., car boot sales) to help generate income to maintain the physical fabric of the park. Stakeholders spoke of the concern and uncertainty as to where this lost income might come from and what the longer-term impacts of it might be.

Finally, one of the overriding disappointments that many people we spoke to highlighted was the cancelling of much of the 150-year anniversary celebration events planned for the park in 2020. This was to culminate with a weekend of community celebration in June 2020. A huge amount of time and organisation had already gone into putting together the event prior to the UK wide lockdown in March 2020. Importantly, the 150-year anniversary celebrations were designed to launch the park into the next stage of its life, showcasing what it had to offer and generating valuable income for its maintenance.

The uncertainty going into 2021 due to COVID-19 and what events and gatherings might be feasible means there is little clarity over what the near future looks like for the park and how it might be able to safeguard itself for the future.

## Opportunities and challenges

Every park faces its own challenges, and this is no different for Alexandra Park. Despite benefitting from a substantial restoration and transformation as a result of the investment through the Parks for People project, Alexandra Park faces a number of challenges. Some of these are small issues: there are some reports of anti-social behaviour, litter was a particular issue during the summer months. There is also a view that not everyone is being adequately provided for in the park; younger people still lack a space to call their own, and for the older users there are further improvements that could be made to help the park become even more 'age-friendly'. Beyond these issues, there are broader issues, largely associated with the governance and financing of the park that offer a challenge moving into the future.

- **Maintaining momentum behind the activity plan and the different groups** that were prescribed as part of this is proving difficult. Whilst the four groups (Wildlife, Arts and Culture, Heritage, and the Sports Alliance) have undoubtedly had successes, the insights from our interviews suggested that there are on-going challenges in engaging people and diversifying the membership of these groups. In some cases, it has been one or two key individuals who it has fallen to in order to drive activities forward; or it has been a lack of expertise to support the group's activities. The purpose of the activity plan was to give locals a shared responsibility in how the park is run, yet this can only work if there is buy in and involvement from users. Connected to this is a lack of distinction in the membership across the different groups, the Friends of Alexandra Park, and the broader Community Governance Board. One interview reflected how *'you've got the same people, in the same groups, at the same meetings...so what is the point of the separate groups?'*
- Whilst all interviewees spoke of the diversity of those using and benefitting from the park, this does not appear to extend to the different governance groups. **Diversity of volunteers is a challenge facing many volunteer entities and this includes Alexandra Park.** It is important that the local community is adequately represented but feedback from stakeholders indicated that this remains a challenge for Alexandra Park. One member of the Friends of Alexandra Park group gave the example of drawing in younger people: *'We don't know how to get the younger generation involved. That is one of the things with all friends groups is trying to get the younger generation involved...It is one of our major challenges moving forward.'* This also means decision making and responsibility is placed on a small number of volunteers.
- **Overcoming a challenging financial situation** is a further concern to stakeholders, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This relates both to the ability of the governance board to generate income that will allow them to continue to hold events and activities, but also in terms of the City Council's budgetary constraints, and what this means for financial support for, and future investment in, parks. For example, in Alexandra Park, there remain long-standing issues with drainage that has affected the stability of trees on the lime walk. There is commitment from the Council to help address this but as budgets continue to be constrained there is a concern that future issues that require more substantial investment may go unaddressed, and ultimately the ability to maintain and build on the Parks for People may be threatened.
- These financial challenges have also **constrained the ability to plan for the coming years.** Whilst there are projects in mind, and aspirations for improvements that could be made, the challenge facing the governance board is how to effectively develop a plan that can safeguard the investment already made whilst facing great uncertainty as to where further investment might come from.

## Learning points

1. The restoration of the existing buildings and infrastructure in the park, whilst costly, has provided valuable facilities for users of the park. These restored buildings have given a base for community and volunteer groups, provided space for businesses to utilise, and opened the park up to countless more users.
2. For a large-scale project such as this, having a dedicated Park Development Officer was critical to ensuring there was sufficient capacity to develop community buy in. This takes the pressure off already constrained park staff, provides a valuable link between the different groups and interests, and acts as a mediator at times to keep things on track.
3. The project has successfully safeguarded the park's heritage whilst also becoming a park for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Manchester. In offering a diverse range of events but also showcasing its rich history, Alexandra Park has become a space for people from all walks of life to thrive in. By becoming a 'destination' park it attracts people from across the surrounding neighbourhoods and beyond.
4. A wide range of events take place in the park, from informal tai chi sessions to large scale formal events such as car boot sales and Carnivals. Alexandra Park has trodden a fine line between these different types of events. It appears that finding a balance between formal events that generate vital income and the more informal activities that draw in diverse users has been a key part of its success; it is a space that offers something for (almost) everyone.
5. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the precarity of income for the park, with the cancelling of numerous events placing even greater strain on the tight finances used to maintain the park. The Governance Board face a significant challenge in planning for the future when the financial situation is such. Greater certainty and security over medium and longer-term income (from local and national government) would allow decisions to be made more strategically and with greater confidence.
6. There remain some small gaps in provision in the park. Some users reflected on the lack of space for younger people to meet and socialise, which has led to some conflict. There are also concerns that improvements could be made to further enhance the 'age friendliness' of the park. Targeted interventions to address these gaps in provision would help to ensure the park is more inclusive of both the younger and older generations.
7. With a project offering such a transformative intervention, it is likely that conflict may arise with existing stakeholders in the park. The well documented tree felling protests are one such example and other small frictions were cited during our research. A factor in this, and a subsequent lesson learnt links to how the aims of the project are communicated to the broader user base at the beginning.
8. Another key learning point here relates to flexibility around the funding. The project team feared they may have lost the funding if the tree felling protests continued and they were not able to restore the park's heritage. Had concessions been required it would have been essential that the funding was flexible enough to allow this, to ensure the broader benefits of the restoration could still be realised.
9. The activity plan for the park, which focused on developing the four community forums, was developed at the bid stage. Whilst this gave clarity to the steps that would be taken to embed the community in decision making and activities in the park, it appears to have not succeeded in developing thriving and distinctive interest groups. This may be linked to the prescriptive nature of having such groups outlined from the start without

allowing them to develop organically. There is also significant crossover of volunteers between groups, along with the 'Friends of' and Governance Board. It is important that there is flexibility built into projects so there is scope to adapt when plans developed at the bid stage are not working as hoped.

10. The Friends of Alexandra Park was one of the key groups involved in securing the Parks for People funding and pursuing the restoration of the park. They now occupy a difficult and sometime poorly defined role in the park. They are neither a specific community forum focused on specific activities (as with the four different activity forums) yet the more recent introduction of the Community Governance Board has negated their role in providing oversight and steer for the park. More clarity from the beginning of the longer-term governance structures and where responsibility lies would have helped to address this.

## Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made

Alexandra Park has been transformed from a park perceived as unsafe, unwelcoming, and neglected to one that is now a flagship 'destination' park for the city of Manchester. The investment from Parks for People has clearly made a significant difference to both the physical and visual quality of the space, whilst also creating a park that attracts a diverse set of users. From being a space that was underutilised - primarily a place for dog walking and jogging but not much else - the park is now home to a wide range of formal and informal activities. It has generated employment opportunities, provided an 'oasis of calm' during the challenging summer of 2020, and helped local people connect with both nature and with their community.

Our user survey indicated how 85% of respondents felt that the park had improved in the last 10 years (or since they started using it) and 93% of respondents are either very or fairly satisfied with Alexandra Park. These figures point to the fact that the funding through Parks for People has generated significant impact, the benefits of which are being felt by the broad range of users now engaging with the park.

By placing local people at the heart of the planning and seeking to give ownership over to those who benefit from the park, the Parks for People project in Alexandra Park has succeeded in providing a resource that brings substantial benefit to those that use it. One interview reflected on this:

*I think it's a lesson in what you can do if central government and grant funders trust the...people to come up and give their knowledge and understanding, I think it's an example that investment in public resources increases the value, quality, wealth of the public realm and that in the end has got to be for the good of the people.*

The investment in the park totalled £4.5 million with £2.2 million being provided by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. £1.9 million was match funded by Manchester City Council with the remainder being provided by sports funders. Without the Parks for People funding it would have been a huge challenge to achieve investment to the scale that was realised. The council succeeded at the third attempt to secure the Parks for People funding, which emphasises the need there was to bring in this external funding.

Ultimately, there remains work to do. This will require further investment to capitalise on the substantial transformation that has already taken place but is necessary to help safeguard the future of the park. One local councillor, a long-time user of the park, summarised:

*Without [the Parks for People funding] the park could not be like it is. It could not be everything that people wanted it to be.*

*It's not perfect, there are always things that you could do better but I think that there's enough [of a] foundation laid for the park to continue to be as good as it is.*

## Appendix 1: Methodology

Research for this case-study was heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fieldwork began in the first few months of 2020, with key documents reviewed and initial contact made with key stakeholders. The initial visit to the park was conducted in March 2020 and included an in-depth interview with Alexandra Park's 'Park Development Officer' who was in post during the Parks for People project. Shortly after this first visit fieldwork was halted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent UK lockdown. Ultimately, it was agreed that fieldwork on the Alexandra Park case-study would be suspended until later in the year. This was, in part, to allow for fieldwork to capture the experiences of park users during the 'COVID summer'.

Fieldwork was restarted in September 2020. In total, six further in-depth interviews were conducted remotely with a variety of stakeholders connected to the park. This included park officers, members of the Governance Board, members of the different 'Activity Groups', a local councillor, and the park ranger. Whilst it was not possible, due to COVID-19 safety restrictions, to undertake face-to-face data collection in the park itself, seven park users were also spoken to via telephone to understand both the impacts of the Parks for People project and also experiences of using the park during COVID-19. In addition to these interviews, an online survey of local residents was also distributed and received 163 responses. This survey gathered information on use of the park and satisfaction with its facilities. It also collected insights on user perceptions of the changes made to that park as a result of the Parks for People project.

## Appendix 2: About the area

### Local Health

	Whalley Range Ward	Manchester	England
Limiting long term illness or disability, 2011	15.6%	17.8%	17.6%
Households that experience fuel poverty, 2016	18.0%	16.2%	11.1%
People aged 65 and over living alone, 2011	31.5%	39.7%	31.5%
Life expectancy			
At birth for males, 2013-2017 (years)	74.9	75.7	79.5
At birth for females, 2013-2017 (years)	79.9	79.7	83.1

Source: ONS and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

### Index of Multiple Deprivation

	2010		2015		2019	
	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile
Manchester 030B	9,059	3	8,341	3	8,197	3
Manchester 028A	7,211	3	6,738	3	6,827	3

Source: English Indices of Deprivation, MHCLG. Note: Data is included at LSOA level (Lower Layer Super Output Area).

### Economic Activity

Economic activity rate – aged 16-64	Manchester Gorton	England
2005	63.1%	76.6%
2010	59.7%	76.3%
2015	60.2%	77.9%
2019	64.5%	79.2%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS. Note: Data is included parliamentary constituency level (Manchester Gorton).

### Housing Market

Average price paid	2010		2015		2019	
	M16 postcode	Manchester	M16 postcode	Manchester	M16 postcode	Manchester
Detached	£220,133	£288,954	£334,756	£263,015	£325,350	£377,153
Semi-det	£209,615	£172,346	£254,209	£193,714	£346,109	£246,941
Terraced	£143,080	£120,638	£185,622	£141,785	£237,461	£175,810
Flat/maisonette	£79,846	£136,408	£110,264	£152,413	£117,725	£197,618
Overall average	£124,157	£146,428	£174,852	£164,084	£173,609	£212,496

Source: HM Land Registry.

## Photo credits

Cover: Alex Pepperhill