

Kneller Gardens – ‘Friendly Parks for All’ consultation on the challenges faced by blind or visually impaired park users.

Consultation feedback and project recommendations

1. Background

As part of Richmond Council’s continued commitment to improving our parks and open spaces, the Parks Team carried out a consultation to understand how blind people or those with visual impairments and their families / carers currently use our parks. The Council were interested to hear from those that are blind or suffer from visual impairments and those that care for them, what they like about our parks, what barriers they face when visiting parks, and what would improve the quality of the experience of using our parks.

Improvements such as clear signage, unobstructed pathways and multi-sensory displays will benefit all park visitors, but we are seeking to understand how these can be designed to include blind people or those with visual impairments. The consultation forms part of the Friendly Parks for All Project managed through Richmond Council’s Parks Department.

The consultation was featured on the consultation portal on the Richmond Council website and took place between 13th January and 24th February 2020. Members of the Council Community Engagement team worked to promote the consultation, along with the Communications team who promoted the consultation through social media. Organisations working with blind and visually impaired residents were contacted directly. Achieving for Children VI team contacted families in the borough with blind and visually impaired pupils attending Richmond Schools

2. Summary of Results

13 people responded to this consultation. All took part online although there was the option to submit a written response. Assistive technologies were also offered.

- 1 of the respondents was blind,
- 1 respondent was visually impaired and 1 had another family member who was visually impaired.
- 9 respondents were answering on behalf of a family member who was either visually impaired or blind.
- 1 respondent was a local resident with no visual impairment or family member with a visual impairment

2.1 Do you visit any Council parks either yourself or with a blind or visually impaired person?

All respondents were asked about their visits to parks and whether they visit alone or with other visually impaired people. A minority of respondents visit parks unaccompanied. Most respondents visit parks and open spaces accompanied by a blind or visually impaired person or with a sighted person:

- 3 visited themselves (23%)
- 4 visited with a blind or visually impaired person (31%)
- 6 visited themselves and with a blind or visually impaired person. (46%)

2.2 Which Council managed park do you visit?

All respondents said that they visited local parks. Many respondents (77% mentioned that they visited more than one park and 9 respondents (69%) reported that they had visited one or more London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames managed park as opposed to parks managed by other authorities / organisations.

A total of 18 different parks were mentioned by respondents and all respondents visited between 1 and 8 parks with an average of 3.4 parks/residents. This includes respondents who mentioned that they visited parks in the local area which are not managed by the Council -these are Richmond Park, Bushy Park, Marble Hill Park. One respondent visited Hounslow managed parks.

The most popular parks were the 2 local Royal Parks – Richmond Park was mentioned by 7 respondents (53.8%). Bushy Park was as popular and mentioned by 6 respondents.

The parks mentioned were spread across the borough, however no parks in the following areas of the borough were mentioned by respondents:

- Barnes
- Ham and Petersham.
- Fulwell
- Mortlake
- St Margarets

The 18 parks mentioned have been grouped below into local areas. The facilities offered by each park has been identified:

Park	Facilities	Number of Respondent
Heathfield / Whitton Parks		
Heathfield Recreation Ground Friendly Park for All	Playground / Open Space / Accessible Sensory Trail	1
Murray Park	Playground / Open Space	1
Hampton Parks		
Carlisle Park Friendly Park for All	Playground / Open Space	2
Hampton Common	Playground / Open Space	3
Hampton Green	Playground / Open Space	1
Hathrop Park	Playground / Open Space	1
Nursery Green Hampton	Playground / Open Space	1
Teddington Parks		
Bushy Park	Open space / Playground	6
Church Road Play Area, Teddington	Playground	1
Grove Gardens Teddington	Open Space	1

Park	Facilities	Number of Respondents
Twickenham Parks		
Kneller Gardens Friendly Park for All	Playground / open space	4
Marble Hill	Playground / open space	2
Radnor Gardens	Playground / Open Space	3
Twickenham Green	Open space	1
York House Gardens/ Twickenham Riverside	Playground / open space	1
Kew / Richmond / Sheen Parks		
North Sheen Recreation Ground	Playground / open space	1
Richmond Park	Open space / Accessible Sensory Trail	7
Westerley Ware, Kew	Play facilities	1
Existing Friendly Parks for All are identified in the table above		

2.3 How often do you visit a Council park?

The consultation asked how often respondents visited a Council park. 62% of respondents visit a park at least once a week,

- 31% at least once a month, and
- 8% less than once a month.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage 100%
Everyday	3	23%
Several times a week	3	23%
About once a week	2	15%
About once a fortnight	2	15%
About once a month	2	15%
Less than once a month	1	8%

2.4 What do you like about the Parks that you visit?

Most respondents identified more than one thing that they liked about the parks that they visited. The comments focussed on:

- Parks infrastructure - level, well maintained and defined pathways and benches were all mentioned
- The natural environment - the variety of trees and flowers, and being out in a park or open space.
- Opportunities for sports and exercise
- Other comments included the good variety of equipment on offer in some parks.
- One respondent commented that they felt safe

Natural Environment		Park Facilities		Sports and exercise	
Number of respondents		Number of respondents		Number of respondents	
Nature and wildlife	1	Even paths	2	Sports equipment	2
Open space / space (4) Surrounding nature (1) Green (1) Gardens (1)	7	Well maintained/clean	2	Exercise	1
		Seating	2	Variety of equipment	1
Habitats/trees/ flowers	5	Ease of access	1	Outdoor gym	1
Views	1	Parking facilities	1	space for games	1
Opportunities to enjoy outdoors	2	Safe	1		

2.5 What are the barriers to visiting Council parks for you or your blind or visually impaired family member?

Respondents were asked to consider several issues that may act as barriers to spending time in parks. Issues with other park users was mentioned by 69% of respondents including issues with cyclists, dogs and children. In their comments respondents discussed anxiety caused by inconsiderate use of shared paths.

Problems with parks infrastructure (e.g. paths, steps) was mentioned by 38% of respondents and included one comment about potholes, foxholes in pavements and grass that make the park

hazardous for blind and visually impaired park users as well as badly maintained slippery and dangerous paths that are not swept. Uncleared dangerous rubbish such as broken glass and cans were also mentioned as hazards by one respondent.

Other barriers (that were listed) included getting to the park (31%) and parking near the park (23%). Nothing to do (23%) and inappropriate equipment (23%) were issues for some respondents. Fear for family safety was mentioned by 2 people but there were no comments made to elaborate on this issue.

An additional barrier that was mentioned by one respondent was a lack of disabled toilets in parks.

2.6 Suggested improvements

The consultation sought to understand how respondents' experiences when visiting parks could be improved to encourage further use of parks by the respondent group. Suggestions included:

- Restrictions of use to cyclists and dogs
- Quieter areas specifically for those who are blind and visually impaired and indeed with other neurological diseases
- Specific area for exercise of dogs
- Improved parks maintenance – filling in potholes including in grass area, clearing paths and picking up rubbish
- Additional outdoor gyms and shared cycling schemes
- Signs and maps modified to benefit VI park users.

One respondent made the following comment relating to the need to ensure that parks are well maintained: "The Council needs to get the basics right in all parks before spending our money on a few fancy showpiece projects!"

Full details of identified barriers are given in the table below together with suggestions made by respondents relating to each of the of the barriers.

Identified barriers	Number of respondents	%	Comments	What can we do to improve your experience?
Other park users e.g. cyclists or dogs				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cyclists 	9	69	Cyclist using shared paths is a nightmare when I cannot see, especially in Carlisle park in front of the tennis court area.	Restricting the use of footpaths to cyclists. Often cyclists are travelling at over the 20mph speed limit that is now on the roads.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children 			Obviously, lots of children who are not careful with vulnerable adults - in my experience parents (especially on a Sunday in Bushey park) have them running, scooting and cycling on the paths. Very frightening for husband. Also dogs! All dog owners seem to think everyone loves them! They don't! Very frightening for husband as he can't see. I realise we all have to share park - but marked lack of consideration for others.	Quieter areas specifically for those who are blind and visually impaired and indeed with other neurological diseases. Cyclists weaving in and out and swearing makes the whole experience horrible. Noise is also upsetting to such people. But we do like walking and need to for health - so not a tiny area. Seating to sit and listen to nature and smell the smells! More education for parents and other park users. We have stopped going to the cafe area in Bushey park now - the children who are not controlled make the whole experience inside the cafe and outside in that lovely walk around the stream horrendous!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dogs 			dog fouling,	Restrictions on dogs, like enforced use of leads or non-dog areas
			So many dogs let loose	Specific area for exercise of dogs. I'd like to see park staff identify dog foul and disposing of it as often dog users can be seen not to pick it up and dispose, so parks remain clean and safe for children to explore and enjoy the outdoors.
Park infrastructure e.g. path network, steps and obstacles	5	38	A lot of the paths in North Sheen Rec are covered in mud that never gets cleaned and some of the paths, particularly by the Dancer Road entrance, are full of potholes and covered in tree debris that is never swept up.	1. Fill the potholes on the paths in North Sheen Rec by the Dancer Road entrance - we have been reporting the problem for years and nothing is done - it is very dispiriting.

			There are also numerous fox holes around the grass (not on the football pitches, as those get refilled), which make walking on the grassed area very hazardous for anyone with a visual impairment or other mobility issue.	
				3. Request the contractors at North Sheen Rec to fill in all the fox holes on the grassed area - not just those on the football pitches. Until these very basic tasks are completed in all parks, it is extremely irritating to think that the Council is considering spending our money on fancy showpiece projects in parks that are too far from where people live to ever benefit from. People with visual impairment have limited access to transport - less fancy but more meaningful improvements to all parks like pledging to fill all potholes in all parks' paths and filling in all foxholes in grassed areas would cost less and be much more appreciated by more people with disabilities.
Parks maintenance			I pick up broken glass, cans and rubbish from parks I use on a daily basis. Problem is even worse in summer months	2. Ensure the contractors at North Sheen Rec do the job council taxpayers are paying them to do and regularly sweep mud, leaves, etc off paths so that they are not so slippery and dangerous for people with a visual or mobility impairment.
Something else			Lack of disabled toilets,	
Parking near the park	3	23		
Inappropriate equipment	3	23		Signs and maps for modified for VI, computerised options to zoom into maps
Nothing to do	3	23		just improve all areas in other questions facility to hire bike and passenger seating to take someone in a side bike
More facilities				My son is 16 and blind. He visits the parks with me. He would like more things to do like open air gym equipment or a tactile sensory pathway.
Getting to the park	4	31		
Fear for family safety	2	15		

2.7 How can the Council improve the accessibility of a park for users who are blind or visually impaired?

The consultation explored what would make parks more accessible for people who are blind or visually impaired. Many of the responses to this question focused on the improvement of parks infrastructure for blind and visually impaired people.

Most respondents (85%) would like to have level footpaths that were firm or slip resistant, and 15% mentioned tactile paving.

Activities such as a specially designed tree trail, (62%), and tactile maps and signs (54%) were chosen by respondents as features that would make the park more accessible for those with sight impairment. Sensory experiences including plantings to improve the sensual experience of being outside (54%) was also popular choice to make parks more accessible. However only 2 respondents thought that braille signs.

Features that are sought:	Responses	%
Level footpaths that are firm, slip-resistant and slightly textured	11	85%
Activities for people with sight impairment e.g. a tree trail with tactile labelling	8	62%
Sensory experiences – e.g. planting that emphasises a sensory experience	7	54%
Tactile map and signs	7	54%
Information about the park and facilities	6	46%
Safe access to the river	5	38%
Tactile paving	2	15%
Information in braille	2	15%

There were some additional suggestions from respondents, some relating to additional activities and others relating to additional facilities that could be included in parks: sensory benches, sculpture, toys and planting. Access to plenty of benches suitable for people with limited mobility is a recurring theme. Outdoor gym equipment was also mentioned.

Activities suggested by respondents:
Supported bike riding
Noisy toys
New facilities:
Wooden sculptures / seating that are tactile
Sensory planting - fragrant flowers
Benches that are suitable to people with limited mobility
More benches
Open air gym equipment

3. Would you like to be involved in a working group to develop designs that will ensure that more people with sight impairments will feel welcome and supported when they visit our parks and open spaces?

10 of the respondents stated that they would like to be involved in a working group to develop designs that will ensure that more people with sight impairments will feel welcome and supported in their visit to our parks. Their contact details will be passed on to the project lead who will contact them on future consultation.

4. Discussion of themes

The RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool¹ estimates that in Richmond the percentage of people living with sight loss compared to overall population is 2.82% (3.43% for 2030).

This translates into a total for the borough of:

- 5680 people who suffer from visual impairment
- 285 people who are blind.

¹ RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool, 2020

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics/sight-loss-data-tool>

- The total number will rise to 7290 in 2030.
- In Richmond there are over 3180 people aged 65+ who suffer from sight loss or blindness.
- 580 people who have visual impairment or sight loss also have an additional disability. 70 blind people have an additional disability.
- 120 Children (aged 0-25) in the borough are blind or partially sighted and 59 of these have additional educational needs.(2019)

4.1 Frequency of visit and barriers to visit

- Most of the participants visited parks at least once a week (62%) but some were infrequent visitors. From the consultation there was no indication if the 38% of respondents who visit less frequently do so because of barriers such as physical barriers and how far this is a lifestyle choice, if they used other venues for spending time outside (e.g. countryside walks) or were unaware of the opportunities that parks provide to improve health and wellbeing.
- All respondents were park users and there were no blind or visually impaired respondents who did not make regular use of parks represented in the consultation. This means that we were unable to test the barriers to visiting for non-visitors through this consultation. This will have implications for the Friendly Parks for All project which aims to encourage increased use of parks by this group.
- Raw data from the most recent Parks Satisfaction Survey conducted by LBRuT in 2019 identified that 95 of 767 of consultees (12.4%) visited a park once a month or less. The reasons given for lack of visits included 44/95 said not enough time, 12/95 said lack of appropriate facilities, 4/95 cited health issues including limited mobility, 1/95 feel unsafe, and 1/95 poorly maintained. In common with this consultation other studiesⁱ have identified the following as the main barriers to participation:
 - Difficulties with public transport - problems for people with limited mobility accessing all forms of public transport, limiting their access to parks. 4 people (31%) mentioned getting to the park as a barrier, 3 people mentioned problems parking near parks. One participant commented *“People with visual impairment have limited access to transport”*
 - Dependence on others Some people with disabilities are dependent on others to accompany them to outdoor facilities; this restricts their opportunities to take part in activities. Most of the respondents told us that they visited parks with others, only one participant said that they were blind.
 - Poorly maintained paths and park maintenance Well maintained paths are essential, particularly for people with visual impairment and wheelchair users. Poor park infrastructure was identified by 38% of participants as a barrier to visits in this consultation
 - Lack of access to appropriate information due to a lack of awareness of the needs of underrepresented groups in terms of accessing information in appropriate formats, as well as a lack of readily available information. Tactile map and signs were suggested by 7 (54%) of participants and Information about the park and facilities in the park were suggested by 6 respondents (46%). 2 respondents suggested information in braille.

Studies have identified other barriers^{2 3}not tested in by this consultation:

- Lack of time and / or motivation, Many studies report that “lack of time” and motivation are major barriers to taking part in engaging with outdoor spaces. This barrier is reflected in the Natural England annual Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment. This annual study asks why people who spend limited time outdoors do not spend more time outside. “Too busy at home” (10%), and “no particular reason” (9%) were given as reasons. The most recent MENE noted that the proportion of people reporting bad health as a barrier had increased over the last year (23%).⁴
- Attitudinal problems - attitudes towards the use of parks e.g. lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with the park were not tested in this consultation. The consultation asked about fear of personal safety and 2 respondents said that this was a barrier to their use of parks. Unfortunately, they did not elaborate on their concerns or how they could be overcome.

² Barriers to participation for underrepresented communities <http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Barriers-to-Participation.pdf>

³ Kin Wai Michael Siu Accessible park environments and facilities for the visually impaired Facilities 31(13/14) · October 2013

⁴ Natural England Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: Headline report and technical reports 2018 to 2019 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-headline-reports-and-technical-reports-2016-2017-to-2017-2018>

- Lack of awareness of opportunities Studies show that underrepresented communities such as the blind or visually impaired are not targeted sufficiently to raise their awareness of opportunities. The limited number of respondents to the consultation may reflect the fact that this community is not aware of the benefits for their health and wellbeing of spending time in parks such that it acts as a barrier to use.

Many of these barriers and themes were reflected in a previous consultation for the Friendly Parks for All project with people with dementia and their carers.⁵

4.2 Use of local parks

Respondents visited 18 different parks across the borough, many of them small local parks. Three of the parks mentioned by 7 respondents are already included in the Friendly Parks for All programme. The pattern of use supports the model of Friendly Parks for All which aims to provide local parks across the borough which are accessible to all local people, including the communities who experience barriers to spending time outside. Most of the parks mentioned have a mixture of open space and play facilities, that offer a variety of facilities and habitats. Three destination parks – Richmond Park, Bushy Park and Marble Hill House Park and Garden were also mentioned by consultees.

4.3 Reasons for visiting.

There were more positive mentions of the natural environment than any other factors. Any proposals for enhancing Friendly Parks for All should use this as a starting reference point. The facilities offered in the park were also mentioned, though less frequently. Good park maintenance and feeling safe were also mentioned as a reason for visiting individual parks as was ease of access, even paths, seating, and parking facilities. Activities in the park including exercise and sports facilities were also mentioned by several respondents.

5. Recommendations

Include the following recommendations in the design of future Friendly Parks for All in the borough:

5.1 Park infrastructure

- Ensure that there are an adequate number of regularly placed benches in the park that are in good repair and suitable for people with limited mobility.
- Include a variety of equipment (playpark and outdoor gym equipment) suitable for people who are blind or have visual impairments
- Ensure that the path network is suitable for people who are blind or visually impaired, that there are no obstructions (e.g. tree roots), unnecessary steps and that there are handrails where there are steps. Gates, stiles, chicanes and other barriers to access should also be limited and only used where necessary. Design guides for accessible paths are available from the Sensory Trust www.sensorytrust.org.uk/information/factsheets/outdoor-access-1-paths.html and RNIB Factsheet Designing Gardens and Nature Trails www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Designing-gardens-and-nature-trails.docx
- Ensure that Friendly Parks for All are located near transport links and that there is adjacent disabled parking available for use by blind and visually impaired visitors.
- For Kneller Gardens explore with the consultation group what additional equipment and facilities would make the park more accessible. This would include accessible signs, information appropriate activities including companion cycling.
- Ensure that where possible there is a disabled toilet available in the local area for park users to make use of. This should be referenced within the park so that it is obvious to park users and included in any information about the park facilities.
- Develop the sensory infrastructure within parks including sensory trails, sensory features such as sculptures and benches etc. Consider including sensory planting where possible. RNIB Factsheet Designing Gardens and Nature Trails www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Designing-gardens-and-nature-trails.docx includes lists of fragrant and sensory plants for inclusion in sensory trails.

⁵ London Borough of Richmond upon Thames [Friendly parks for young and old \(Barnes Green\), 2017](https://haveyoursay.citizenspace.com/richmondcs/dementia-friendly-parks/consult_view/)
https://haveyoursay.citizenspace.com/richmondcs/dementia-friendly-parks/consult_view/

- Design nature into the Friendly Parks for All schemes as the consultation shows that this is the one thing that people like most about their visits to parks. Try to incorporate quiet areas for reflection and to feel close to nature into the design. Design these areas so that there is limited intervention from other park users including cyclists and dog walkers.

5.2 Parks maintenance

- Ensure that paths and grassed areas are safe to use for people with disabilities including those who are blind or have visual impairments. This includes removing any hazardous materials (e.g. glass and cans) regularly, ensuring that leaves, mud and other slip hazards are regularly removed, and that potholes and fox holes are filled in.

5.3 Awareness

- Develop awareness of the benefits of spending time in parks and open spaces for blind and visually impaired people, by working with local care groups who work with them.
- Ensure that there is accessible information available in appropriate formats so that blind and visually impaired people can plan their trips to the parks.
- Raise awareness of park users, including cyclists, dogwalkers and other park users, of the needs of people with disability including people who are blind and visually impaired. There is a café in Kneller Gardens which could take on the role of acting as a Help Point for people who find themselves struggling in a particular situation. Some signage and accessible information could encourage people to ask for help if they become lost or confused.

6. Next steps

The Parks and Open Spaces Team plan to:

- Address observations made by respondents in specific parks in the borough – for example pot and fox holes in the grass at North Sheen Recreation Ground.
- Work with the contacts from the consultation in order to develop plans for Kneller Gardens Friendly Parks for All.
- Include Achieving for Children VI team and their clients at the project development stage.
- Keep the Richmond Equality Stakeholder Scrutiny Group and the Richmond Disability Advisory Group on Access informed of progress as they have both taken on an overview role of the project.
- Include the recommendations from the consultation into the Friendly Parks for All checklist used as a first assessment when a new park is included in the scheme.
- Use the learning from this consultation in other parks as budgets permit.
Given the current situation of social distancing no timeline for the recommendations are currently offered.

7. Reference material to inform project development

- a. Sarah Bell [Sensing nature: Visual impairment and the natural environment](https://sensing-nature.com/). The Economic and Social Research Council, 2018 <https://sensing-nature.com/> This body of work includes:
 - **Designing urban green space with sight impairment in mind**
 - **Walking group guidance**
 - **Supporting nature adventures**, A podcast about providing opportunities to experience a sense of adventure in nature
- b. **Nature Narratives** Visual awareness guidance to support multisensory experiences Sensory Trust www.sensorytrust.org.uk This body of work includes:
 - Sensory Trust guidance** - factsheets including inclusive design for people with disabilities
 - Sensory Garden Design Advice**: An online guide produced for those interested in developing sensory gardens and sensory trails
- c. Thrive Tips on garden design for people with-sight loss <https://www.carryongardening.org.uk/tips-on-garden-design-for-people-with-sight-loss.aspx>
- d. RNIB Designing gardens and nature trails <https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Designing-gardens-and-nature-trails.docx>

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