

# Key learning from the Doncaster Future Park's approach to community engagement



This is a short summary of the key learning from the Doncaster Future Parks team<sup>1</sup> regarding successful engagement with communities. It is based on their experience of engaging with communities in four parks in 2021 and 2022: The Craggs, Hexthorpe, Campsall and Town Field.

## What is Doncaster Future Parks?

Parks and open spaces are widely recognised as important assets within Doncaster; providing free, local and accessible opportunities for residents to stay active. Doncaster Future Parks (DFP) is the name given to Doncaster's approach to evaluate and improve the provision of parks and open spaces within the borough, with an emphasis on reducing physical inactivity – the DFP team is embedded in the Get Doncaster Moving (GDM) team – whilst also contributing to the borough's wider health, wellbeing and environmental objectives. Bespoke park plans have been developed for 15 parks across Doncaster<sup>2</sup> following extensive engagement with stakeholders, including residents, volunteer groups and other organisations. The capital development within these parks will be staggered over a period of four years. The DFP team know from extensive research and evidence<sup>3</sup> that each site and community surrounding the parks is unique, therefore the DFP team are committed to adapt the engagement approach to reflect the differences of each site. Ahead of capital investments starting, the DFP Team undertake engagement with communities to not only finalise plans for capital works but to further understand what communities want to see happening in their parks to encourage physical activity and explored the role residents can play themselves.

Most parks have a 'Friends Of<sup>4</sup>' group who have been involved with the development of the work so far. Day to day they play an important role in supporting residents to be active in the park through maintaining the spaces and setting up events and activities.

## Initial approach: The Craggs, Hexthorpe and Campsall parks

Across the first three parks, the DFP team designed a survey to get insight from residents into the future priorities for their local park. These were modified for each park reflecting the bespoke park plans and included questions on improving signage, waymarking and footpaths; activities in the park; and ideas for increasing usage. Where communities had a high level of ethnic diversity, the survey was translated into different languages.

The consultation approach involved two phases:

---

<sup>1</sup> It is based on an interview with Ben Russell (Future Parks Manager), along with supplementary documentation provided to help contextualise the activities and learning that took place.

<sup>2</sup> Developed by Land Use Consultants.

<sup>3</sup> Including phase [one](#), [two](#) and [three](#) of Behavioural Insight work; Resident panel [surveys](#); [Doncaster Talks](#); and [Well Doncaster](#) community insight.

<sup>4</sup> 'Friends Of' groups work in partnership with Get Doncaster Moving to ensure that Doncaster's green spaces are well-used and maintained. They are groups of volunteers.

- firstly, a face-to-face event in each local community, which included informal conversations and paper surveys to be completed in person. This was promoted as a launch event for the online engagement.
- secondly, an online survey following the event which was open for two weeks.

### Engagement strategy

**Face-to-face activities** were prioritised at the start to allow informal conversations to take place and ensure residents had the opportunity to ask questions. At The Craggs, the initial face-to-face event was held at a local shopping centre on a Saturday where footfall was high. An event was held at Hexthorpe Park itself with refreshments offered at the café and the local Friends Of group and rowing club involved. For Campsall Park, a face-to-face event was planned but had to be cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions at the time.

**Online survey distribution** following face-to-face events (and instead of this in Campsall) was through Facebook adverts (targeted to those living in a certain radius of the park), Friends Of groups and other local community groups at each park. Surveys were kept open for a two-week period.

**Engagement with young people** was pursued through the DFP Team contacting headteachers in schools in the local area to try and ensure that their voice was represented. The DFP team used existing contacts (either they or wider GDM team members held) in local schools to open up lines of communication and let them know about the consultation. Individual relationships were developed with school staff in the early stages of the engagement, with one school putting forward some useful responses from one class, but other schools did not respond or communication faltered following a promising start.

### Key lessons learned

From the initial approach at the first three parks, a number of lessons were learnt:

- Translating the survey into three languages for Hexthorpe park did not significantly increase the number of responses from these communities, suggesting that **further engagement with specific community groups or leaders is needed**. The Team initially relied on emailing community groups and asking them to forward the link but this activity alone did not yield significant results.
- **Engagement with young people is challenging**, and using school contacts was not effective; it was difficult to find the right person who had the time and influence to manage a school response, and other factors can influence schools' willingness to engage.<sup>5</sup>
- Paying for **boosted Facebook advertising** in specific local areas was successful in gaining attendance at face-to-face events and completed survey responses.
- **A long engagement period is needed** as getting community groups on-board to help reach residents takes time, and reliance on emails alone did not yield a significant number of survey responses.

---

<sup>5</sup> The school closest to The Craggs did not want to get involved due to concerns about the safety of the park and they did not want to be seen as promoting its use. There was recognition that the communication with that school could have been handled differently and that the DFP aims and objectives needed to be outlined more clearly.

- To utilise their value from the start, **Friends Of groups need to be positively engaged earlier in the project** (one year in advance if possible).
- However, reliance on Friends Of groups for engaging residents and disseminating the survey **did not necessarily reach a broad demographic with the local communities**. It was successful where Friends Of members had links with other community groups (e.g. parish council) and could promote the consultation activities through this method.
- The survey questions provided useful information to the DFP Team to support the capital developments in the parks, but **did not gain resident buy-in** to the wider DFP objectives through encouraging community engagement.

Overall, it was felt that the approach taken for The Crags, Campsall and Hexthorpe provided enough information and insight for DFP to progress work in these parks but did not succeed in maximising engagement with the community. The approach was therefore adapted for Town Fields with an ambition to increase the number and diversity of responses to consultation and encourage community engagement in the wider DFP objectives to improve park usage in the future.

## Adapted approach in response to learning: Town Field

To try and improve the quantity of consultation responses and depth of information through the survey, the DFP team changed their approach in Town Fields. The park is also different from the previous three parks as it is surrounded by differing socio-economic communities; the park has a number of routes that are commonly used by commuters; and there is no current Friends Of group for the park.

The strategy for Town Field differed in structure from the initial park engagement:

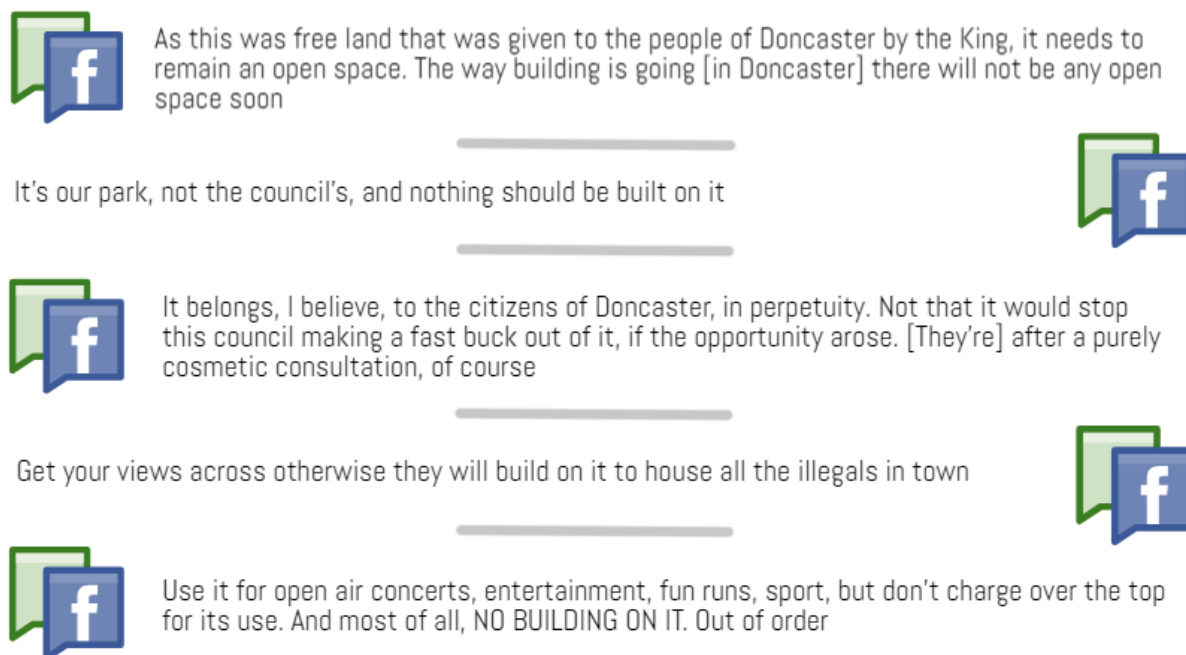
- Firstly, they launched a modified online survey that focused more broadly on current usage, barriers to usage and suggested improvements (focused on activities rather than capital investment), with an additional question asking respondents to rank the priorities for the park and another assessing residents' interest in joining a community group focused on the park in the future.
- Following this up with a series of face-to-face engagement activities, both open to all and targeted at specific groups in the local communities,
- Continued promotion of the survey throughout and beyond the engagement activities with no fixed closing date

The engagement period overall was much longer than for the first three parks, with the survey open in total for seven weeks. This adapted approach successfully resulted in many more local residents involved in both face-to-face activities and responding to the online survey.

## Engagement strategy

An online survey for Town Field was launched two weeks before the face-to-face engagement started. The survey and main face to face event was promoted through Facebook with little context around it. Whilst not a conscious decision, as a result of the lack of wider context the online content stirred up strong community feelings about what parks are (or should be) for. The social media comments were strongly against any building development on the Town Field site which promoted debate and criticism of the (incorrect) suggestion that the Council planned to build on the park.

Figure 1: Facebook comments in response to a post about the survey



Although many comments were negative (see Figure 1 above), the strength of feeling opposing any development on Town Field led to a good response to the survey and an increased attendance at the face-to-face event, giving the DFP team the opportunity to distribute more accurate information on the plans.

An initial face-to-face event was held in Town Field. A large staff team attended, including representatives from the DFP team, the wider GDM Team, Well Doncaster, community teams and two councillors. This meant that plenty of staff were on hand to talk to residents and answer questions whilst collecting survey responses. A free coffee van was provided, as well as sports equipment so that physical activity opportunities were visible.

Engagement with young people was this time done through using the **Young Advisor**<sup>6</sup> system in Doncaster. The young advisors are aged between 16-18 and employed for a set number of hours by the Council to work on youth engagement projects. The young advisors were given a brief which outlined the aims of capturing the youth voice, testing innovative approaches of engagement to reach a diverse audience and generate community interest that would last beyond the engagement period.

---

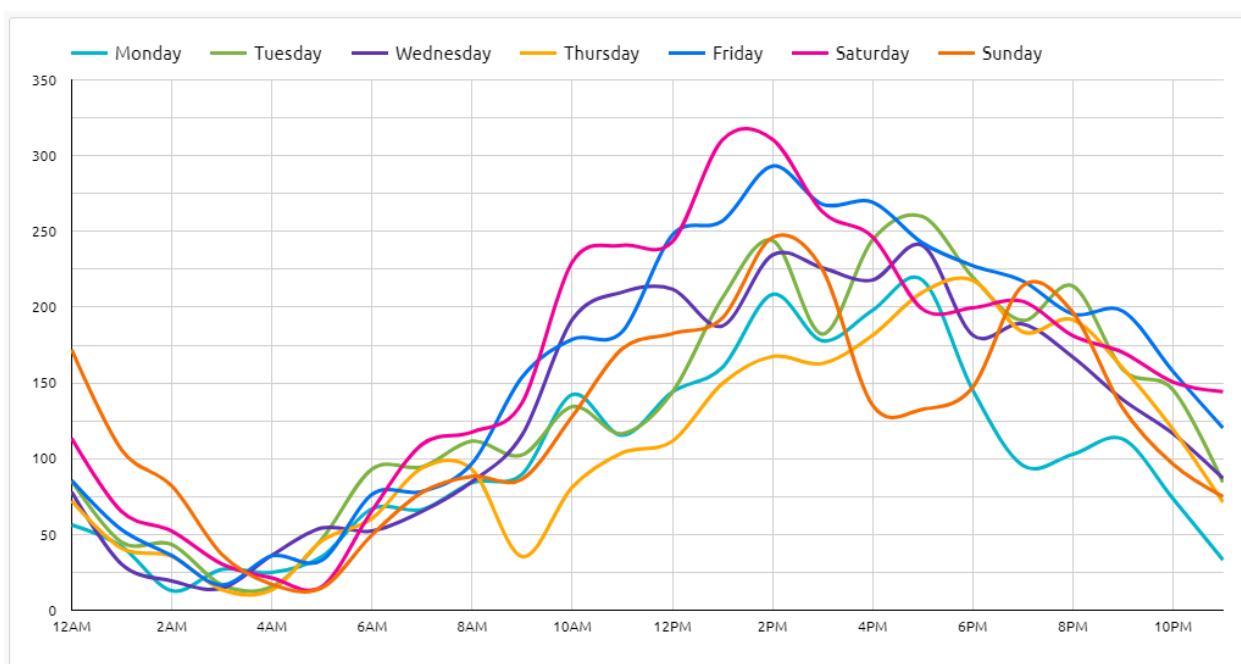
<sup>6</sup> [Doncaster Young Council Advisors](#) are a team of young people aged 16-24 who help organisations and local services improve their products and delivery and make them more young people friendly.

Their plan involved:

- Adapting the survey to make it more child and young person friendly.
- Visiting schools and talking to young people outside schools and in the community.
- Attending the Town Field face-to-face event alongside the Council team, setting up a stall and organising activities suitable for young people.
- Undertaking their own consultation day, visiting another local park and a shopping centre.
- Promoting the survey on their own social media accounts.)

The DFP team also tried to again engage with young people via schools. They took a different approach and offered an incentive to the school to try and encourage completion (a free activity through [Bioblitz](#)); however, this was unsuccessful.

**Targeted engagement activities** continued on Town Field site after the initial event such as face-to-face conversations with community groups and leaders. This included meeting with one of the Positive Action Groups (PAGs) in the local community and promoted bat walks. HUQ (footfall location) data<sup>7</sup> was used to plan activities for times when the park was busiest to maximise the number of people who could be engaged.



**Footfall on Town Field by hour – Spring - Summer 2022. The data indicates peaks and troughs of usage through a given day on Town Field during this specific time period. Onsite engagement took place on a Saturday starting mid-day. Targeted interventions i.e. bat walks took place on a Thursday evening 7.30-9pm.**

**Ongoing survey promotion** was undertaken for a longer period of time than for previous parks. Additional targeted activities gave more opportunities to engage diverse communities and gather more responses. The DFP team also placed QR codes on signs around the park which encouraged

---

<sup>7</sup> HUQ is a platform for monitoring footfall data, used in the DFP evaluation to collect data on usage of parks across Doncaster.

people to access the survey on their mobile phones. All promotional and marketing material was given the same Future Parks branding.

### Key lessons learned

The combined methods to improve access and engagement with the survey led to 1,181 responses, constituting approximately 10% of the local population around Town Field. This was a substantial increase from between 150-220 responses received in each of the three previous parks.

- The **longer engagement period** for Town Field not only gave more time to gather survey responses but also meant that the Future parks team could be more reactive to the needs of the community and ensure recruitment was targeted towards any gaps in the demographic profile of respondents. With more time, the team were able to assess the overall success of the engagement and make iterative changes where necessary.
- **Developing survey questions to gain more in-depth insight**, particularly asking respondents to rank their priorities for action rather than having to choose just one, improved the quality of the survey data.
- The survey captured the details of residents who **expressed an interest in being part of a new Friends Of Town Fields Group**. As a result of this approach, approximately 30 residents have attended group meetings so far.
- Using the **young advisors** led to higher levels of engagement with young people in the community. 99 respondents in the survey were under 18 and a further 46 were aged 18-24.
- More **face-to-face engagement**, with an increased number of staff and Council representatives at events, allowed more residents to be involved in conversations and have their questions and/or concerns answered in person.
- The **range of engagement activities** and methods used was influenced by the absence of a Friends Of group at Town Field. Although Friends Of groups can be beneficial in linking to the community, where they are not present, the Council are required to try alternative methods of engagement, potentially learning more about what works best and for whom and having greater influence over the engagement process.
- **Launching the survey first** and having the face-to-face event in the middle of the survey window was, in relation to Town Field, an effective structure for maximising engagement and raising awareness as more time could be spent promoting the survey.
- **The new methods worked to increase engagement but this does come at a cost**. Although Facebook advertising is a cost-efficient and successful way of communicating with residents, events and other face-to-face engagement strategies come at a greater cost (see Figure 2 overleaf).

Figure 2: Cost comparison of engagement work at the four sites

Type of activity	The Craggs	Campsall	Hexthorpe	Town Field
Facebook advertising	✓	✓	✓	✓
Engagement day activities				✓
Engagement day refreshments	✓		✓	✓
Written translation of survey			✓	✓
Printed materials	✓		✓	✓
Young advisors time				✓
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>£350</b>	<b>£100</b>	<b>£750</b>	<b>£2,725</b>

## Considerations for future consultations

In response to the key lessons learned from community engagement at the first four parks, the following considerations have been identified for future consultations.

Currently it is not possible for the Future Parks team to identify how and where respondents accessed the survey. They can differentiate between paper and online responses, but any further breakdown of the online surveys is not possible. It would be useful to identify where people came to the survey from – such as from QR codes, Facebook advertising, or face-to-face activities.

**Including a question in the survey about where they found out about the survey, or using different links, would help Doncaster understand more about the most effective methods of engaging people with the survey.**

Similarly, it was acknowledged that it would be useful to understand more about who is attending the face-to-face events, again to understand the extent of the engagement with different communities. **A way of collecting data systematically from engagement events would help to identify gaps for ongoing targeted engagement work.**

Future engagement activities need to focus on ethnic minority groups to ensure that the opinions and perspectives from these groups are included in the consultation regarding park developments. Learning from the success of the Youth Advisors in accessing the youth voice, ensuring that ethnic minority groups are visible means that the **Future Parks team will need to forge strong links with people who are trusted gatekeepers to these communities. Working with prominent community groups and/or Community Connectors<sup>8</sup> may be a method of achieving this ensuring communication moves beyond email alone.**

Friends Of groups are key links to local communities and when harnessed effectively, can maximise engagement. However, these need to be **part of a wider engagement strategy to ensure that it is as broad as possible.** Further work also needs to be done to understand more about each Friends Of group, particularly who to contact to build an effective relationship and how to work more collaboratively together.

---

<sup>8</sup> [Community Connectors](#) are paid roles, hosted by voluntary, community and faith groups, to build relationships with communities across Doncaster.

Face-to-face activities continue to give opportunities for informal conversations about park plans and will remain an important feature of future strategies. The **timings of these are important; holding events in the summer months maximise the chance of better weather increasing attendance.**

Increased community engagement comes at a cost, **and so budget must be sufficient for the time needed and the strategies deemed most appropriate.**