

Engaging Older People in Parks and Green Spaces



**Winston Churchill Memorial Trust
Travelling Fellowship 2007**

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Introduction

I am employed as a Parks Officer within the Parks Services Department of Leicester City Council. The primary purpose of my role is the development and implementation of customer focused park services which allow the public to access quality parks and green spaces in Leicester.

In 2006, I made an application to The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (WCMT) and was awarded a 2007 Traveling Fellowship in the category of 'The Third Age – Opportunities and Challenges for an Ageing Population'. The Trust was looking to support projects that examined any aspect of enriching life for the elderly.

My Fellowship proposal was to travel to Australia, Canada and the USA for six weeks to meet with various agencies who were involved in engaging older people in parks and green spaces.

The main aims were to identify strategies and approaches that would be appropriate for use in Leicester's parks as well as in the UK as a whole. In particular I wanted to look at the influence they had on an older persons' life through leisure, health & fitness, social contact, community involvement and volunteering opportunities and how we could engage older people more effectively.

To achieve these aims I arranged to meet with various agencies working across a diverse network of green spaces. These agencies included Local Government Authorities, State Parks Services, National Parks Services, Parks & Garden Trusts and non-profit community groups.

Parks and green spaces have an important role to play in community life, particularly in large urban environments where access to the natural environment may be limited. They provide a place for community engagement with the environment, health, recreation, leisure, culture and education and are often a sense of pride for many local communities.

For parks to be of real value though, they have to meet the needs of their many different users, while equally aspiring to engage with their non-users. Key to this is understanding who the park users and non-users are, and identifying what their needs are, both now and in the future.

Society in the UK and much of the developed world is ageing. In the UK the 2001 Census showed for the first time, that there were now more people aged over 60 than children under 16. Projections by the Government's Actuary Department (GAD) indicate that by 2031 nearly 23% of England's population will be aged 65 and over, and that those aged 85 and over will form 3.7% of the population. The main drivers of this change are the low fertility rates (less people being born) and the increasing life expectancy of people as they live longer and healthier lives.

These changing demographics are going to present many new opportunities and challenges to both Central and Local Governments. It is therefore important that all mainstream services reflect the changing nature of society and recognise the part that they have to play, just as much as those services directed specifically at old age.

Opportunity Age is the UK's first national ageing strategy published by the Department for Work and Pensions and draws upon a wide range of research and consultations with older people and the organisations that work with them. When asked, older people identified several themes as being essential for them to enjoy their lives both actively and independently. The seven themes were highlighted as:

- Housing and the home
- The neighbourhood
- Social activities, social networks and staying active
- Getting out and about
- Income
- Information – the key to choice
- Health and healthy living

Parks and green spaces have the capacity to engage older people, where it really matters to them, adding to their quality of life and enjoyment of their latter years. Clean, green, safe and active parks and green spaces will enable older people to get out and about in their local neighbourhoods, provide opportunities to participate in social activities and networks and assist in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. For these reasons it is important that we develop park services that are accessible and meaningful to older people.

Fellowship Trip

My Fellowship was carried out in two phases with three weeks in Canada and the US followed by three weeks in Australia. This gave me the ideal opportunity to gather information and share experiences with a broad range of park professionals from quite different organisations. While all were involved in engaging older people in their parks and green spaces, the differences in organisational structures, resources and facilities made them almost as diverse as the older populations they served.

San Francisco

San Francisco is a relatively compact city, but with a resident population of 780,000, it is the second most densely populated city in the US.

The city has a significant older population, 13.7% of its population aged 65 and over, compared to the California State average of 10.6% and the US National average of 12.4%. There are almost as many people aged over 65 as there are aged under 18 living in the city.

The City of San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (SFRP) is responsible for managing the city's urban parks and provides recreational opportunities for the city's older adults. One of its' main facilities that I visited was the Golden Gate Park Senior Center. The centre is within Golden Gate Park, the crown jewel of the city's parks.

The centre provided many opportunities for seniors (aged 55+) to socialise, exercise and learn. Popular classes included Tai Chi, dance (400 attend Valentine Day dance), art & crafts, walks and educational classes provided in partnership with City College of San Francisco. Outings such as a week long camp at the City's campsite in Yosemite were also very popular. The centre had a small enclosed garden for seniors in the gardening club, and access to gardening was seen as one of the most common ways to getting seniors involved in green spaces, SFRP also operate several community gardens across the city.

Many older people were using the parks simply for walking, either to improve their own health or to exercise their dog, and a number of walking groups were using the parks. The provision of good quality access, good signage, seating and toilet facilities was felt to be particularly important in encouraging greater participation, and was a theme repeated in all the cities that I visited.

There was recognition of the need to provide more recreational activities for older people as the population grows but at the same time the department was reducing its expenditure on seniors' programmes. More & more activities were attracting a fee, where as previously they were free, and it was felt that this acted as a barrier to participation by some seniors, especially those living on low fixed incomes following retirement.

Older people have a higher perception and fear of crime on parks than many younger people and this was seen a barrier to older people using their parks and green spaces. The department is investing in Park Patrols to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour, increasing the current 4 rangers by 10, to provide a more visible presence on the parks.

The US National Parks Service (NPS) is represented in San Francisco where it manages the Golden Gate National Recreational Area (GGNRA), and I was fortunate enough to spend a couple days with the service at their Fort Mason Headquarters. The National Parks Service manages the collection of parks that make up the GGNRA in partnership with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and The Presidio Trust.

Although the National Parks Service did not have any specific strategy for engaging older people in the parks it still provided many opportunities for engagement. With over 75,000 acres in the parklands, promoting and maintaining access to the parks is essential in enabling older people to enjoy the parks. The NPS website contains a wealth of information on accessibility to the sites and is supplemented by the inclusion of maps that make planning a visit easier. There are also several visitor centres and Park Rangers on duty everyday to provide assistance.

There are many different activities available within the parks but perhaps the most popular with older people were the nature and history based walks and talks offered by the Rangers and volunteers. In fact, volunteering was a major component in the parks engagement with older people. There are almost 14,000 volunteers involved in a variety of activities within the parklands, many of whom are over 60 years of age, and annually they contribute over 400,000 hours to the GGNRA which represents a huge financial contribution to the National Parks Service.

Volunteering is popular with older people as it provides an opportunity to learn new skills, pass on experience, stay active, be involved and meet new friends. With ever increasing pressures on park budgets the input of community volunteers was considered of paramount importance to the success of the GGNRA. With such large numbers of volunteers to manage it was necessary to develop a policy on volunteering and now all volunteers are enrolled as VIP's, Volunteers in Parks.



Older volunteers at work in one of the Golden Gate National Parks Nurseries

While there appeared to be no shortage of volunteers it had been noted that many of the 'newer' older volunteers were looking for more flexible opportunities. This was seen as a direct result of the Baby Boomer generation starting to volunteer. These new Baby Boomers wanted to get involved but were already leading busy lifestyles, so new volunteer opportunities were being developed such as one off events to complement the many longer term volunteer programmes.

Toronto

The fifth largest city in North America, a place where every other person is from somewhere else, and home to 2.5 million people, of which almost 14% are aged 65 and over.

Senior citizens are the fastest growing age group in Toronto with the number of seniors doubling over the last three decades. Future population projections for Toronto predict that by 2021 the over 65s will have increased by 22%.

Toronto enjoys a world renowned reputation for the quality of its parks and green spaces and is affectionately known as 'A city within a park'. The Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division (TPFR) of the city council is responsible for engaging the diverse communities of Toronto within their parks.

The Division recognises the benefits of active ageing and delivers a wide range of activities and events aimed at keeping older people both socially and physically active. These activities, like those in San Francisco, usually include arts & crafts, physical exercise, learning activities and social networking opportunities and are predominately arranged at the TPFR community and recreation centres. Programmes and activities are delivered in a category known as 'Older Adults' and although generally designed and promoted as being for those aged 60 and over, many incorporate those aged 55 and over.

In 2006 TPFR played host to the Toronto Seniors Games that saw over 1400 participants compete in 69 events at 55 different venues. This proved to be extremely successful in getting seniors out and about and active in their parks.

It was apparent that older women were much more likely to attend activities, particularly healthy exercise such as walking, and that men were under represented and more work was needed to engage with them. Activities that included the use of tools were popular with men, such as wood burning and carving as well as the community gardening programmes

In 2004 TPFR developed its long term strategic plan "Our Common Grounds" to guide the division over the following 15 years. As part of the plan it was identified that there was a need to complete a Seniors Recreation Strategy. The strategy has now become an important component of TPFR's commitment to lifelong physical activity.

Developed with the council's Seniors Task Force and the Seniors Roundtable the strategy sort to engage as many seniors as possible in the development of the plan and lead to extensive public consultation. The consultations helped to identify four key areas that needed to be considered in order to develop a meaningful strategy that would lead to better engagement with older Torontonians and their parks and recreation. Having completed the strategy, TPFR are now in the process of developing an implementation plan to deliver the objectives.

The four key areas for consideration are:

- Access
 - Physical facilities and resources
 - Allocation of facility space
 - Cultural Diversity
 - Financial
 - Location and transportation

- Programmes and service delivery
 - Programmes and services
 - Customer service
 - Partnerships

- Communication

- Staff and volunteer resources

Much of the focus of the strategy is about removing or minimising the barriers that older people face in accessing parks and green spaces. It includes the completion of accessibility and safety audits of facilities and the modification of some facilities. There is the need to ensure that older people are integrated into the space allocation planning of facilities and the need to provide equitable access for all. Too many parks and green spaces have nothing to offer older people and consist of nothing more than grassy areas with children's play areas or sports fields.

Engaging older people also means recognising that they are not a homogenous group and that cultural diversity should be taken account of. At one facility in Toronto the development of a Bocce court for the older Italian/European immigrants had also proved successful in engaging local seniors from the West Indian community.

As with San Francisco the introduction of fees had proved to be a problem for those older people on fixed incomes following retirement. The use of concessions and free activities is important but has to be balanced out with their sustainability given the financial resources of parks departments.

The development of a Seniors Strategy would appear to be essential in ensuring that parks and green spaces are adequately meeting older peoples' needs.

New York

They say that if it happens anywhere, it happens in New York. The City of New York Parks and Recreation Department (NYPR) is synonymous with Central Park, yet it is much more than that. The department is responsible for delivering parks services to more than 8 million people, including nearly 1 million people aged 65 and over.

It is predicted that New York's elderly population will increase by 44% by 2030.

The NYPR provides many of the same facilities and opportunities that can be found in Toronto and San Francisco. With parks playing host to many of the city's large cultural events they were seen as an ideal environment for promoting inter-generational activity, helping to break down some of the barriers that existed between the younger and older generations.

At the NYPR senior centres there had been a reported reduction in older users and it was becoming more difficult to attract new seniors. One explanation for this, also commented on in San Francisco and Toronto, was the differing needs of Baby Boomers and current seniors. With older people staying more active and living healthier lifestyles there was an increasing reluctance for people to get involved at seniors only facilities, and evidence suggested that facilities would need to become more multi-purpose to provide multi-generational activities. Activities at the Salt Marsh Nature Center in Brooklyn included bird watching, dancing, walking, Pilates, yoga, wood working, history club, drawing, photography and softball.



Outdoor reading room in Bryant Park, New York

Many older adults refuse to attend activities that only cater for older people, as one 76 year old volunteer told me “they are full of old people who make you feel old”.

Like with San Francisco the presence of uniformed Park Rangers was felt of vital importance in getting older people to use parks and green spaces. NYPR operates a Parks Enforcement Patrol to police its parks and green spaces as well as the Urban Park Rangers who are predominately engaged in community education.

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Promoting accessibility was again highlighted as key to getting seniors to use parks and features on the departments' website and at its visitor centres and through numerous publications produced by the department

The Parks and Recreation Department works with many different partners to deliver its services, and to help ensure that it reaches all of New York's diverse communities. Among these partners are Green Thumb, a division within the parks department, which is the largest urban community gardening project in the US with 20,000 members taking care of more than 600 gardens, and CityParks Foundation, an independent non-profit organisation that offers parks programmes throughout New York's five boroughs.

GreenThumb was established in 1978 and is still thriving today with many of its volunteer gardeners coming from the over 45 age range. Although it does not specifically target the older person, GreenThumb is successful with engaging older people with green spaces because it connects them with the desire to have access to nature and a green natural environment, often difficult to find in large urban areas.

Community gardening has proven to be particularly successful in the more deprived neighbourhoods in the city where participants are able to grow their own produce. There are a variety of gardens in the network, some providing produce for individuals, others produce for social programmes such as local 'soup kitchens' and some for beautification and places for relaxation, peace and quiet. As well as providing the opportunity to engage in physical activity the gardens helped in improving mental health by relieving some of the stresses and anxieties associated with everyday life.

GreenThumb supports the garden network primarily through its warehouse distribution, technical support, educational workshops, materials and by making small grants. A lot of the gardens are on previously derelict land, so by turning them into gardens they not only promote a safer neighbourhood but build stronger communities through a sense of shared ownership.

The CityParks Foundation is one of NYPR major partners and provides numerous opportunities for older people in New York's parks. One of the projects it has been running is its free Seniors Fitness Programme.



Seniors Fitness
yoga in the park.

Originally starting as a free tennis programme to encourage seniors to get out and about, get fit and meet new friends it has now been extended to include yoga and walking due to its popularity. The programme runs twice a year, Spring and Autumn, and provides all three activities at several parks in the five boroughs, ensuring maximum accessibility. Participants are encouraged to attend at least two sessions a week over a six week period to get the health benefits. The Fitness Programme is again being considered for expansion to include more activities, such as cycling and swimming, due to its success.

Even in moderate amounts, exercise can help older people feel better, maintain or lose weight, reduce the risk of heart disease and diabetes, and minimize the symptoms of arthritis. No matter how old you are, your body will always benefit from physical activity.

Sydney

Sydney is the capitol of New South Wales and the most populous area in Australia. While the City of Sydney itself is relatively small, only about 140,000 live there, the greater Metropolitan area is home to 3.9 million people of which 11.9% are aged 65 and over. The aged population of Australia is expected to double to between 26% and 28% by 2051.

The National Strategy for an Ageing Australia was published by the Australian Government in 2001 and supports an holistic view to ageing services. It places great importance on ensuring that older people remain active in the community, benefiting not just the individual but the whole community, socially and financially.

Parks and green spaces in and around Sydney are managed by many different Local Government Authorities and other agencies. Local Government Authority parks departments in Australia are generally much smaller than their counterparts in North America.

Centennial Parklands is the largest green space in Eastern Sydney, extending to some 890 acres and is managed by the Centennial and Moore Park Trust. The parklands include a golf course, equestrian centre, extensive natural areas, informal recreation areas, sports fields and an Entertainment Quarter. User surveys conducted by the Trust showed that older people were extensive users of the parklands.

The park is particularly popular for dog walking as it has some of the few areas available for letting dogs off lead. Pets, and particularly dogs, are often kept by older people for companionship and having somewhere to walk a dog off lead was seen as important to many of the park's older users. However, dogs off lead can often be a contentious issue in parks as there are many people, young and old, who are fearful of dogs. Any policy to control dogs in parks should take account of their role in older people's lives.

Research for the parklands Plan of Management acknowledges that Baby Boomers are seeking more stimulating and challenging experiences, they are likely to be involved with sport to a greater age and were often seeking contact with nature in their leisure time.

There had been a noticeable increase in the number of older people walking and jogging within the parklands. It is necessary to consider that the provision of facilities alone does not increase participation in physical activity and that a combination of good design, promotion and management of programmes is needed to encourage individuals to participate in physical activity.



Seniors picnic
Centennial Park

Sutherland Shire Council also supported the idea that older people were involved in sport to a greater age and were experiencing strong demand for their over 45's and over 55's football leagues. The council was making significant investment in new sporting facilities on the outskirts of the shire to accommodate increasing usage.

The Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney (RBGS), managed by the trust, offered several opportunities for older people that emphasised the desire of older people to have contact with nature and horticulture. The gardens operated a very successful volunteer guide scheme with 80 out of 81 volunteers being seniors. The volunteers provided guided walks every day in the gardens and also operated an information kiosk. Many of the volunteers came to the scheme with just an appreciation of plants but were supported by RBGS to develop their knowledge and skills. New guides would be appointed a mentor for up to 18 months while they developed the skills to enable them to lead walks. Regular meetings with garden Directors, talks from staff and other guides gave the volunteers a strong sense of connection and ownership with the gardens.

The RBGS were also involved, in partnership with the New South Wales Department of Housing, with an initiative called 'Community Greening'. Similar to the GreenThumb community gardening project in New York the programme works to develop community gardens in public housing estates and unused public land. Like many other projects of this type it enables older people, who formed the majority of participants, to get out and about and promotes learning, social cohesion and can lead to improved health through physical

activity. A major benefit of community gardening programmes is their capacity to create green spaces close to where people live, making them very accessible.

Melbourne

Voted as ‘one of the most liveable cities in the world’, Melbourne is the state capitol of Victoria. Like Sydney, it is also a large metropolitan area of 3.6 million people administered by 31 different councils with the actual City of Melbourne covering mainly the Central Business District.

While the majority of parks and green spaces are the responsibility of the individual councils, Parks Victoria is responsible for 40% (6,200 hectares) of the green space within urban Melbourne. Parks Victoria has wide statutory responsibilities for the co-ordination of the green space network which also includes state and national parks.

Parks Victoria has at the core of its service delivery the message of “Healthy Parks, Healthy People”. This message is promoted through branding on most of the organisation’s literature, activities and through general marketing. It promotes the message that if parks are healthy i.e. that they are clean, green and safe, they will attract people to use them and that these people will then gain from the associated health benefits of physical activity and contact with nature. With many older people suffering from some form of ill health or limited mobility, access to a local park or green space is important for the promotion of health and a sense of well being.

As with many of the other organisations that I have visited there are many similar events, activities and volunteer opportunities for older people to engage with Melbourne’s parks. Partnerships and community engagement are vital aspects of ensuring the success of the parks. Parks Victoria has a community participation unit which has developed a Community Participation Framework to ensure that all sections of the community, including older people, are engaged in decision making within the parks, ensuring that the parks meet the needs of all their users.

One partnership with the Merri Creek Management Committee saw the development of a Bilingual Park Guides programme. This programme was particularly valuable in engaging older immigrants who had little or no understanding of English. Eleven volunteers, who already spoke more than one language, undertook a course aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and physical activity. The course developed their knowledge and skills of the local open spaces, flora and fauna, presentation skills and organising guided walks and has led to community groups joining the guides on walks of local parks and green spaces.

In Australia the barbeque is an essential part of encouraging informal use of parks and many parks contain free facilities. With access and transport in particular being an issue, many older people do not use parks unless as part of a family activity, so availability of family orientated activities was highlighted as a way of bringing older people into parks.

Conclusions

There were some very clear and consistent themes that emerged during my Fellowship, occurring on a global basis but applicable to Leicester's parks and green spaces and the UK as a whole:

- *Parks and green spaces have a direct impact on Older Peoples quality of life.*
- *Older people want to be involved with their parks and green spaces.*
- *Increasing demand for recreational & leisure activities for older people.*
- *Older people are staying active for longer.*
- *Older people can experience improved physical and mental health through involvement with parks and green spaces.*
- *Changing patterns of parks usage.*
- *Older volunteers provide a valuable resource to parks managers through knowledge, skills and time given.*
- *Important to consult with older people and involve them in decision making.*

These themes will need to be considered in future strategic planning and policies to ensure that we are able to realise the maximum opportunities that they present, and to meet the new challenges they will bring.

While many parks departments concentrate their resources and efforts on children and youth, the ageing population is set to play an increasing role within parks and green spaces.

The benefits of engaging older people in parks and green spaces are numerous and include improved health, providing social networks and activities, building and strengthening communities, creating safe neighbourhoods, maintaining independence and a sense of well-being and a positive impact on older people's quality of life. There are also economic benefits to engaging older people; reduced spending on health and social care through being more active and living healthier lifestyles and contributions made to parks and green spaces through volunteering.

While the opportunities exist to actively engage older people these can not be achieved by parks departments on their own. The need to consult with older people and create partnerships is vital to achieving successful engagement, and ensuring that older people can access quality parks services and the associated benefits.

Recommendations

The Fellowship has proven to be very successful and rewarding for myself, enabling me to expand my knowledge and experience in engaging older people. It has always been my intention that the Fellowship would act as a catalyst by which my colleagues and I could improve our parks services in Leicester.

Having considered everything that I have learned during my Fellowship the opportunity exists for us improve the engagement of older people in Leicester's parks and green spaces through the following recommendations.

1. Develop a Seniors Recreation Strategy
2. Develop a Seniors Fitness Programme
3. Expand access to community horticulture
4. Improve volunteer opportunities
5. Develop partnerships with older adult services providers & advocacy groups
6. Conduct consultations with seniors to inform future planning

In Leicester we already provide opportunities for our older generations to get involved with their parks and green spaces. Through the development of these recommendations we shall be able to meet the challenge of an ageing population by providing new opportunities that are meaningful and relevant to older people.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I must thank all of those at the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for awarding me the Travelling Fellowship and for all the advice and support given to me throughout the application process, planning and undertaking of the trip.

I must also acknowledge the support of my colleagues and management at Leicester City Council, not only agreeing to give me the time off work to make the trip, but also for covering my workload in my absence.

Lastly, I must say thank you to all of those that offered me their time and assistance overseas, and helped to make my Fellowship the success and rewarding experience that it was. I would particularly like to thank the following people for their help:

Peter Oquendo	San Francisco Recreation & Parks
Brian O'Neill	National Parks Service
Rich Weideman	National Parks Service
Theresa Kreidler	National Parks Service
Dr. Isabel Wade	Neighborhood Parks Council
Brenda Librecz	Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation
Ed Fearon	Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation
Matt Bentley	Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation
Ken Jeffers	Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation
Lucy Stern	Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation
Kevin Jeffrey	New York Parks & Recreation
Nicole Moorehead	New York Parks & Recreation
Gary Rozman	New York Parks & Recreation
Eddie Stone	GreenThumb
Ian Innes	Centennial Parklands
Joel Johnson	City of Sydney Council
Mark Spruhan	City of Sydney Council
Stephen Bourke	Sutherland Shire Council
Donna Osland	Botanic Gardens Trust Sydney
Stephen Paul	Botanic Gardens Trust Sydney
Alan Ward	Kingston City Council
Kathy Kiss	City of Melbourne Council
John Senior	Parks Victoria
John Argote	Parks Victoria
Dimi Bouzalas	Merri Creek Management Committee

A special thank you goes to Ed Fearon and all his family in Toronto, who kindly invited me to join them at their family Thanksgiving meal and introduced me to the delights of Canadian Football.

Apologies to anyone missing.

Annex

My itinerary for the trip was as follows:

30th September 2007

Flight to San Francisco

1st October to 5th October

San Francisco Recreation & Parks, Neighborhood Parks Council & National Parks Service

7th October

Flight to Toronto

8th October to 12th October

Toronto Parks, Forestry & Recreation

14th October

Flight to New York

15th to 19th October

New York Parks & Recreation, GreenThumb and CityParks Foundation

22nd October

Flight to London

23rd to 27th October

At home (school holidays)

28th October

Flight to Sydney

30th October to 7th November

Centennial Parklands, City of Sydney Council, Sutherland Shire Council and Botanic Gardens Trust Sydney.

8th November

Travel to Melbourne

9th November to 16th November

Kingston City Council, Parks Victoria, City of Melbourne Council, Merri Creek Management Committee and Play & Recreation Association Victoria.

18th November

Return to UK