



Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability

ISSN: 1754-9175 (Print) 1754-9183 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjou20

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To cite this article: Sina Shahab, Jessica Richmond, Thomas Smith, Matluba Khan & Neil Harris (04 Oct 2026): Co-designing parks with teenage girls and young women: gendered experiences of space and strategies for inclusivity, Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability, DOI: [10.1080/17549175.2026.2740102](https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2026.2740102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2026.2740102>



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Published online: 04 Oct 2026.



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Co-designing parks with teenage girls and young women: gendered experiences of space and strategies for inclusivity

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ABSTRACT

Research on park use through a gendered lens remains limited, despite evidence that park design and facilities disproportionately cater to boys and young men, often overlooking the needs of teenage girls and young women (TGYW), including those with female experiences. This paper addresses this gap by examining how TGYW engage with parks in Cardiff (Wales, UK) and how these spaces can be reimagined to support more inclusive use. Using a co-design approach, the study involves TGYW in mapping park use and articulating their needs and aspirations. Through interactive workshops, participants assessed conditions, identified barriers, and co-created redesign proposals. The findings show that park use is shaped by the interaction of physical design, social dynamics, and normative patterns of use, often resulting in “exclusion by design.” While concerns around safety, social inclusion, and lack of age-appropriate amenities remain significant, participants articulated a broader vision of parks as spaces for sociability, creativity, and self-expression. The paper conceptualises safety perception as a relational and socio-spatial phenomenon, co-produced through design features, social norms, and everyday practices, and highlights co-design as a “work site” for negotiating gendered experiences and spatial claims. It concludes with recommendations for context-sensitive and participatory approaches to inclusive urban park design.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 May 2025

Accepted 17 September 2026

KEYWORDS

Gender-inclusive parks; teenage girls and young women; co-design; urban greenspaces; gender-sensitive urban design

Introduction

Urban parks play a crucial role in promoting physical activity, mental well-being, and social cohesion, particularly for young people. Research has demonstrated that the nature of urban environments significantly impacts the physical and mental health of young people, for better and worse, in complex and nuanced ways (Bhugra et al. 2019; Roe and McCay 2021). The use of parks and greenspaces in the urban context has been shown to reduce stress (Feda et al. 2015), is positively associated with cognitive development (Dadvand et al. 2015), and exposure to greenspaces during childhood is correlated with improved mental health outcomes later in life (Engemann et al. 2019).

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In addition to their mental health benefits, parks and greenspaces are critical for encouraging physical activity among young people. Lack of physical activity is a key driver of childhood and youth obesity (Sogari et al. 2018), and urban parks play a crucial role in promoting higher-intensity activity and overall physical activity levels (Raney, Hendry, and Yee 2019). They complement active transport as readily accessible sources of physical activity, with research showing that children and young people accumulate a significant portion of their moderate to vigorous physical activity outdoors (Truelove et al. 2018). The availability, design, and features of park facilities are especially important for young people, whose activity is often restricted to areas within walking or cycling distance (Dias et al. 2019). Therefore, ensuring that parks are accessible and inclusive to diverse populations should be a key priority in urban planning and public health policy.

However, preferences for, perceptions of, and use of public parks vary among different gender, socio-economic, and ethnic groups (Mak and Jim 2019; T. Sanders et al. 2015), and patterns of engagement often reflect broader social inequalities (Boyd et al. 2018), as feminist scholars have drawn attention to over decades in relation to urban public space (Pain 1997). For public parks, Evenson et al. (2016) and Derose et al. (2018) found that women, across all age groups, are less likely to visit parks and typically have shorter visits compared to men. Whilst there is considerable research, from the late 1980s onwards, on gendered use of public space (Valentine 1989), there is limited academic research more specifically on gendered experiences of park use and preferences for the social and material production of parks, particularly in the context of the UK.

Recent research conducted by government agencies and charities such as Make Space for Girls (2024) and Homes England (2023) confirms that teenage girls are often overlooked in public space provisioning in the UK. While youth park facilities are intended to serve all teenagers, they are frequently, in practice, dominated by teenage boys, leaving TGYW excluded “by design” (Barker et al. 2022), i.e. the socio-spatial norms embedded within design, which can reinforce normative and gendered perceptions and everyday practices of the safe/unsafe and inclusion/exclusion (Bondi and Rose 2003). This issue is not limited to the UK. For example, research conducted by White Arkitekter (2018), a Scandinavian architectural firm, found that from the age of eight, park usage between boys and girls showed an imbalance of 80:20, with teenage girls feeling ten times more unsafe in public spaces than boys. Whilst longstanding critiques have challenged simplistic binary perceptions of public safety as linked to gender (Stengel 2010), which we address below, existing research has typically focused on safety concerns and perceptions, and mobility constraints, while little attention has been paid to the specific design features that influence TGYW’s engagement with, and safety perceptions in, public parks. The exclusion of TGYW from parks raises critical questions about how urban spaces can be reimagined to promote gender inclusivity.

This paper aims to address this knowledge gap by developing a deeper understanding of how TGYW use existing parks and exploring how these spaces can be (re)designed to be more inclusive and accessible for them. In doing so, it draws explicitly on literature from feminist geography, urban space research, and more recent developments in co-productive practice to understand and envision possible futures, departing from previous research that predominantly focused on safety perceptions and fear in public space for women and, to a lesser extent, diverse gendered experiences. Using Cardiff (Wales, UK) as a case study, the research focuses on the everyday experiences of TGYW in urban parks,

identifying their sense of physical and social constraints to their engagement with these spaces, using imaginative and walking methods. Then, through a co-design approach, TGYW mapped their current use of park facilities, appraised and critiqued their own perceptions of safety and comfort, and articulated their aspirations for improved public space design. By analysing their lived experiences in relation to the design of park spaces and the presence and practices of other user groups, the study provides insights into how gendered dynamics are (re)produced through everyday, relational, socio-spatial interactions, and how these shape TGYW's envisioning of more inclusive park spaces.

This paper begins by reviewing existing literature on gender inequality in parks and public spaces, with a focus on TGYW. It then outlines the methodology, including co-design workshops with TGYW. The findings highlight experienced and perceived constraints to park use, including inadequate facilities, male-dominated spaces, safety concerns, and a lack of appealing amenities. From these insights, the paper offers recommendations for policymakers, planners, and designers to enhance inclusivity through design, policy, and participatory processes. It underscores the need to integrate TGYW's perspectives into landscape and urban planning and concludes by reflecting on the implications for gender-sensitive public space, and the need for research on scalable, inclusive design interventions.

Gendered inequalities in parks and public spaces

Gendered inequalities in terms of inclusion/exclusion, and perceived and real threats in, public spaces remain a pervasive issue worldwide, affecting individuals' mobility, safety, wellbeing, and participation in society. Scholars have examined how urban planning, patriarchy, social norms, and systemic biases contribute to gender disparities in accessibility and security. Public spaces, including parks, have historically been designed with a "universal user" in mind, yet designs often at best overlook and at worst systematically bias against the specific needs of different demographic groups, particularly women and girls (Beebeejaun 2016), whilst the needs of those who identify as LGBTQ+ are further marginalised (Catungal and McCann 2010). Research in urban geography and feminist planning studies has, since the late 1980s, called for gender-sensitive approaches to public space design, recognising that traditional urban environments privilege certain forms of use and certain expressions of identity (including but not limited to gendered identities), while marginalising others (Benny et al. 2024).

Research shows that public spaces are not equally accessible or perceived as equally "safe" by all genders. Women face greater risks of harassment and violence, limiting their freedom to move through urban environments (Moreno, Prados, and Cuenca-Piqueras 2022; Sharma 2020). Understanding women's safety perceptions in public space is core to past and contemporary debates, with a broad and still contentious debate about the interrelationships between safety perception, fear, exclusions, and public space use. Whilst this paper takes the existing and future design and use of parks as a point of departure from debates focused on safety perceptions, there are important elements of conceptual framing from feminist geography approaches to safety that we find productive.

Traditional approaches to women's safety perception have focused on women's fear of crime, sexual assault, and violence in public spaces, the relationships between

perceptions and crime rates, and how fear leads to exclusions. Studies repeatedly show that women are more likely than men to experience harassment or feel unsafe in public places, particularly at night (Madan and Nalla 2016), and previous studies reinforce a narrative that women are more likely to report experiencing fear because of “perceived” vulnerability (Pain 1997). Early work by feminist geographers took critical steps towards understanding the social production of fear and safety as inherently spatial, social, and political, linked both to gendered and wider inequalities (Valentine 1989; Bondi and Rose 2003). This work cautioned against presupposing simplistic relations between space and women’s perceptions and experiences, whilst highlighting the significance of gendered roles both in childhood and embedded in everyday life (Pain 1997), and later recognising structural factors that affect women’s urban experiences, including more in caring roles, part-time work, and resulting more complex daily life patterns (Garcia-Ramon, Ortiz, and Prats 2004). Gender is therefore understood as relational and embedded in everyday spatial interactions rather than as a fixed attribute of individuals (Massey 2013).

More recent feminist scholarship draws a nuanced, complex, and relational picture of women’s sense of safety in public space, with wider implications for experiences of spaces such as parks. Starkweather (2007) found that, working with young women on university campuses, there was a whole range of strategies adopted by women themselves to feel “safe,” including strategies of avoidance, precaution, or being “bold.” The Roestone Collective (2014) reconceptualises established notions of “safe space” for diverse genders. Working against tendencies to use “safe space” as a simplistic anathema of unsafe places, which often reinforces masculinist spatial binaries of private/public, they argue for understanding safe space as something produced relationally and through ongoing *relational work* by all genders. In doing so, they recognise how some “safe spaces,” such as women’s-only spaces, might, at times, reinforce common problems, such as the social and political differentiation of gendered space, yet equally the ongoing work of safe space production, by diverse genders, is mutually constituted with the social production of gendered identity. We might see Starkweather’s (2007) *being bold* and the Roestone Collective’s (2014) *relational work* of safe space as both contributing to a conceptual framework which takes as its focus how women actively produce space, through “individual everyday activities as well as functional collective action” (Roestone Collective 2014, 1354). In this vein, and as a point of departure, this paper considers how both the space of the park and the production of park designs, as “work sites” of situated spatial, social, and gendered productions of space and place.

Our focus on this paper on TGYW’s *relational work* fosters a wider perspective on park use beyond a narrower concern for safety. Whilst safety is of course a current through all elements of park use, understanding TGYW’s potential to be active, engage socially, express themselves, and indeed thrive in public park spaces necessitates a broader understanding of how TGYW themselves perceive their current and future park use. Existing research points to the significance of park spaces for TGYW’s diverse social and embodied activities. For instance, Cohen et al. (2006) found that adolescent girls living near parks, particularly those with amenities conducive to walking and varied activities, engage in more non-school physical activity than those in areas with fewer parks.

Considering the role of design and parks themselves as a *work site* for the relational work of TGYW to thrive in public park spaces, existing research points to the current concerns with traditional urban design. Massey (2013) argued that urban design has long

been shaped by male mobility patterns, marginalising women's spatial needs. Design of parks and public spaces can either reinforce or alleviate gendered safety concerns (Datta and Ahmed 2020), with features such as poor lighting, limited visibility, and isolating structures such as solid walls, and lack of surveillance in parks. In response, feminist urban theorists advocate for gender-sensitive planning strategies, such as better lighting, open sightlines, diversified park uses, and community-led safety efforts (Horelli 2017; Navarrete-Hernandez et al. 2021). However, such intervention strategies can, conversely, also intensify perceptions of insecurity, and undermine the needs of TGYW to express themselves and engage with diverse activities (Miranda and Van Nes 2020). For example, the often-simplified focus on enhancing visibility often leads to the complete removal of vegetation rather than sensible and creative implementation of landscape design coupled with vegetation management (Barker et al. 2022).

Park design often reinforces social norms of TGYW's park use through facilities like football pitches, skate parks, and multi-use games areas (MUGAs), typically dominated by boys and young men, thus normalising their presence and overlooking others' needs (Make Space for Girls 2024; White Arkitekter 2018). Patterns of park use are produced and reproduced through the interaction of physical design, dominant recreational norms, and the everyday practices of different user groups (Kern 2020). For example, the repeated occupation of sports areas by boys and young men can shape other users' feelings of visibility, belonging, and entitlement to space (Pérez-Tejera, Valera, and Anguera 2018). TGYW are particularly affected by these exclusions, as they face limited, unwelcoming park spaces that fail to reflect their preferences or support their participation (Huang and Napawan 2021; Topcu 2019). Previous studies have found that TGYW's views and opinions during participatory design processes are often analysed superficially, emphasising the "what" and disregarding the "why," leading to design interventions that reinforce stereotypes (Shaikly and Mella Lira 2023). For instance, young men's dominance in park activity spaces does not mean that TGYW do not want to use them, but that they feel terrorised by young men's presence, or there is insufficient space for different gender and age groups to use simultaneously.

In the next section, we outline the potential for co-design as a work site for the relational work of park design to respond to the needs of TGYW.

The potentials of urban co-design with TGYW

Researchers and practitioners have long advocated for more participatory approaches to urban design and the need for practical design tools for planners and designers (Navarrete-Hernandez et al. 2021). Participatory approaches to design can engage a wider range of participants and more effectively incorporate the perspectives of under-represented groups; however, traditional participatory mechanisms can sometimes "crowd out" the voices of TGYW. Co-design has emerged as a promising tool for addressing gender inequalities in the design of public spaces, enabling direct engagement with communities to ensure that diverse voices shape interventions (E. B. N. Sanders and Stappers 2008). The highly participative, creative, and engaged character of co-design activities is particularly relevant to giving voice to TGYW and to understanding their relational work in public spaces. The space to build confidence in expressing ideas, to be listened to carefully, as well as shape activities, all support co-design as a valuable

method for working with TGYW. Co-design processes with TGYW can therefore identify key barriers to accessibility and develop targeted interventions with young women that can make parks more inclusive, equitable, and welcoming (Fenster 2005).

Co-designing parks with TGYW can foster a sense of ownership and agency, generating design solutions that better reflect their lived experiences and needs (Cole et al. 2024; O'reilly et al. 2022). Unlike top-down planning, co-design fosters collaboration between researchers, designers, and end-users, ensuring that interventions reflect lived experiences (E. B. N. Sanders and Stappers 2008). While the literature highlights the importance of co-designing solutions, there is a gap in understanding TGYW's relational use of urban parks and how these spaces can be (re)designed to be more inclusive and accessible for them. Much of the existing research lacks empirical insights into the specific spatial needs and experiences of TGYW. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how TGYW navigate, perceive, and engage with urban parks, and exploring how co-design, as a "work site" for the relational work of parks, can inform more inclusive design interventions. More broadly, this study contributes to discussions on the gendered nature of public space and the role of participatory processes in challenging spatial inequalities.

Methods: co-designing urban parks

This study employed a co-design approach to engage TGYW in reimagining their local parks in Cardiff. A total of 58 TGYW, aged 13–15, participated in workshops from three high schools across distinct socio-economic contexts. School A, located in south Cardiff, served a catchment with high levels of deprivation and significant ethnic diversity. School B, in central Cardiff, had a mixed socio-economic profile and a diverse student population. School C, in a peripheral area of the city, primarily served students from lower-income households. Diversity was therefore pursued through the selection of schools serving contrasting socio-economic and ethnically diverse communities, rather than through individual-level recruitment quotas. Participation was voluntary and recruitment was managed by the schools, with teachers helping to identify and invite participants. The research team did not apply standardised recruitment criteria relating to ethnicity, disability, frequency of park use, or other individual characteristics. Whilst this represents a relatively small sample of TGYW across Cardiff, the sample was suitable for the intensive, multi-workshop co-design approach. However, teacher-led recruitment may have favoured students who were more available, engaged, or considered suitable for participation and may not have captured the full range of experiences among TGYW. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable to comparable settings rather than statistically representative of all TGYW in Cardiff. Across these varied settings, participants assessed their current use of local parks, identified barriers to inclusion, and co-designed proposals for more accessible, inclusive, and engaging public spaces. Cardiff's designation as the UK's first UNICEF Child-Friendly City further reinforced the relevance of this study in advancing gender-sensitive urban design for TGYW.

Five parks across Cardiff were selected for co-design to ensure a representative cross-section of public greenspaces, capturing variations in park type, scale, facilities, and condition, ranging from recently refurbished parks to those in need of investment. Each park was within walking distance of the participating school and familiar to students, enabling them to reflect on their existing experiences and perceptions. The potential for

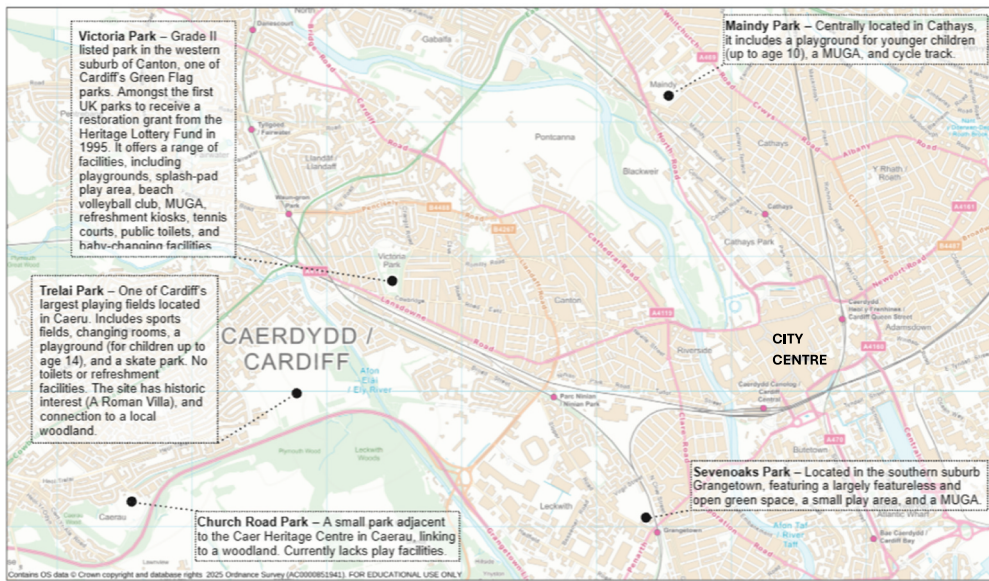


Figure 1. Location of the five case-study parks across Cardiff.

redesign was a critical criterion, as the selected parks needed to offer opportunities for improvement to enhance gender inclusivity. Five Cardiff parks (Sevenoaks, Maindy, Trelai, Church Road, and Victoria) were selected (Figure 1).

Between June 2024 and January 2025, eight half-day workshops and one shorter follow-up workshop were conducted, with between 10 and 16 TGYW participating in each. The park walks and observations therefore took place across different seasons and weather conditions, from summer to winter, which may have shaped participants' assessments of lighting, shelter, drainage, vegetation, and comfort. Workshops included five at School A, with two student groups focusing on Sevenoaks Park and Victoria Park; two at School B focusing on Maindy Park; and two at School C exploring Trelai Park and Church Road Park. Participation in the workshops was voluntary, with students recruited by their respective schools, ensuring informed consent from participants and parents. Each case-study park was explored through two dedicated workshops:

Workshop one: co-assessment and park observation

The first workshop focused on experiential assessments and naturalistic observations, enabling TGYW to evaluate park spaces from their perspective. Prior to visits, TGYW shared personal experiences of park use. Walking routes were planned with participants. The 5–20-minute walking journeys from schools offered informal opportunities to discuss accessibility, surroundings, and expectations. At the parks, participants conducted on-site assessments, mapping facilities and environmental conditions while reflecting on how they experienced these spaces at different times of day. Observations focused on spatial elements (e.g. paths, seating, lighting), social dynamics (e.g. user groups, safety perceptions), and environmental conditions (e.g. maintenance, greenery, noise). Each element was rated on a five-point scale with justifications.

After the walkabouts, participants worked in groups to analyse their findings. Each group focused on a theme, such as access, usage patterns, community value, aesthetics, safety, comfort, cleanliness, or emotional responses. Using maps, coloured pens, and post-it notes, they identified strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Audio recordings captured discussions where possible. This process offered insight into how TGYW interact with parks and the factors contributing to discomfort, exclusion, or disengagement.

Workshop two: co-design, recommendations, and prioritisation

The second workshop focused on co-creating design solutions for more inclusive parks, using creative methods such as collage-making, mood boards (images reflecting desired atmospheres or themes), model-making, and developing park plans. These encouraged participants to critically engage with design elements that shape inclusivity, including seating, lighting, signage, pathways, play equipment, sports facilities, and social spaces. Collage-making and mood boards were central, enabling participants to curate visual references from inspiring parks, youth-oriented spaces, and their own ideas.

Working in groups, participants then developed design plans for specific areas within the case study parks, illustrating how these could be (re)designed to be more inclusive (Figure 2). Each group proposed short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations, ranking them by feasibility and impact. The temporal dimension of recommendations assists with identifying potential early impacts and keeping more ambitious and expensive proposals in the realm of the possible. Design proposals were shared with the wider group to encourage dialogue and refinement, with audio recordings used where appropriate.



Figure 2. Example of a re-designed park space.

The research team played an active role in structuring activities and facilitating discussion, meaning the findings were co-produced rather than unmediated accounts of participants' views. Power differentials arose from the researchers' adult and institutional authority and from the presence of teachers, which may have affected what participants felt able to express. To reduce these effects, participants worked mainly in peer groups, helped plan walking routes, used visual and model-making activities, and collectively developed and ranked proposals rather than responding only to researcher-led questions. Nevertheless, facilitators were predominantly middle-aged adults of varied genders and ethnicities, and teachers remained present throughout; participants may therefore have been less open than they would have been with peers alone. These conditions are treated as part of the institutional context within which the co-design findings were produced.

Workshop outputs, including annotated maps, visual materials, models, and recorded discussions, were coded manually using an iterative thematic approach. Two researchers independently reviewed the materials and identified recurring issues relating to park use and design. Themes were then compared, discussed, and refined through repeated examination across participant groups and parks. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, while the wider research team reviewed the thematic structure to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' contributions.

Key findings

The findings are organised around three themes: participants' experiences of existing park design, their aspirations for improvement, and their prioritisation of proposed interventions.

Park design and TGYW's experiences

Participants in our study highlighted how their experiences in parks were closely related to existing design features. From the five parks, Victoria Park was largely seen as more appealing due to the density of play equipment, the "splash pad" and the café (Figure 3), but all five were critiqued – for both specific and general reasons – as lacking appropriate spaces for TGYW. It was notable, however, that participants found both positive and negative aspects across each park. On the positive side, the presence of greenery and vegetation, offering a sense of "connection to nature," and the availability of seating and open areas that afforded opportunities for social interaction across all five case study sites contributed to positive experiences. Participants appreciated the presence of greenery, large trees, and open grassed areas for providing fresh air and relaxation. Four out of the five parks visited offered a variety of recreational opportunities, including football, basketball, athletics, cycling, playground rides, and multi-use courts. Participants specifically mentioned Victoria Park, as it included a diverse range of settings that catered to the needs of different age groups – i.e. a "teenage park" as well as a "baby park" (Figure 3). However, participants across all groups described these facilities as typically dominated by boys. This dominance was not simply a matter of who happened to be present: concentrating space and investment in fenced pitches, MUGAs, and competitive team sports normalised boys' occupation of prominent park areas and positioned other users as peripheral. In Trelai Park, for example, the predominance of football pitches restricted

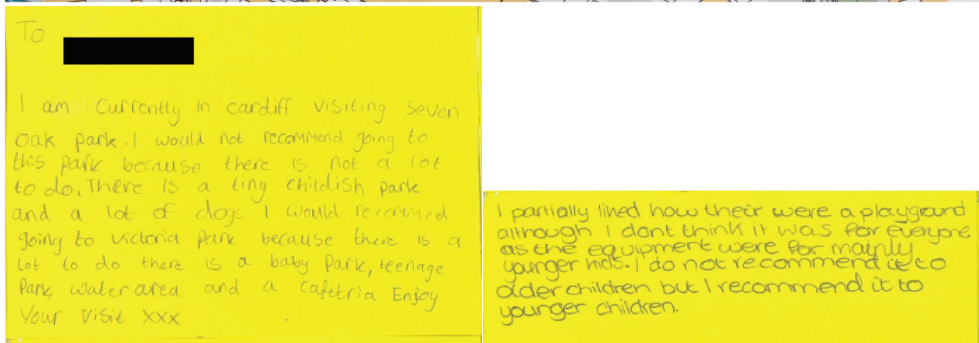


Figure 3. Park co-assessment and observation during workshop one, while mapping focused on challenges and opportunities and what TGYW wanted to see for teenagers.

opportunities for alternative activities. Even participants who played team sports felt uncomfortable entering these spaces, suggesting that spatial design and repeated patterns of use reinforced gendered expectations about who was entitled to occupy them.

Lack of age-appropriate and adequate play equipment and sports facilities, therefore, was highlighted as a major barrier by TGYW for spending time in local parks. Maindy Park, Trelai Park, and Sevenoaks Park were described as too empty or lacking in diverse sports facilities (i.e. they only featured football pitches or MUGAs). In addition, the play parks at Trelai and Sevenoaks were typically designed for younger children (Sevenoaks Park had “a tiny childish park” – [Figure 3](#)) and were seen as disproportionately small relative to the overall park size. With only limited playground equipment, basketball courts, and MUGAs available, these parks were perceived as being designed primarily for younger children (i.e. play equipment was aimed at younger children: “the equipment were mainly for younger kids” – [Figure 3](#)), lacking enough swings (often still perceived as appealing to TGYW), and catering mainly to boys (sports activity spaces). Differentiating themselves as teenagers from younger children was a common theme, both in terms of available equipment in parks and the atmosphere in parks – one participant commented that

there was “lots of noise from [the] primary school” in Sevenoaks. Participants frequently commented on the absence of designated spaces for TGYW, leaving them with few opportunities for recreational or social engagement, or, as one participant put it, “free space to do activities.” Interestingly, during some walks, participants would still play on equipment they considered to be designed for younger children (Figure 4), yet still argued in their assessment that they wanted play equipment better suited to their needs. In this sense, young women did not, in some cases, completely avoid using parks because of inappropriate equipment, but were conscious that it was not designed “for them.”

Participants highlighted how well-maintained walking routes, public artwork, and multiple entry and exit points enhanced the overall accessibility and appeal of parks (for example, Sevenoaks Park). They praised local litter-picking initiatives, adequate bin provision, and community caretaking efforts that were recognised as contributing to clean and well-kept spaces. Maindy Park and Victoria Park are recently refurbished, including new equipment and better-designed play areas, which participants commented made them more inviting and enjoyable. However, it was also noted that for inclusivity of TGYW, and creating gender sensitive approaches to urban parks and public spaces, much more could be done in all five parks to enhance experiences for TGYW.

The availability of ample seating, opportunities for picnicking, and open spaces was also valued for social interaction, family activities, caregiving, and weekend visits by all participants across all five parks. However, although certain elements exist, for example, in Victoria Park, there are plenty of available benches, it was noted by participants that the seating was mainly aligned in a linear formation along paths, rather than as “social” spaces, which were included in all subsequent park (re)designs, as described in the next section, and Figure 5 illustrates.

Lack of public amenities such as the presence and maintenance of toilets was a major concern, as it limited the amount of time participants felt comfortable spending in park spaces. Where public toilets were available (such as Victoria Park), participants raised concerns about their accessibility, cleanliness, and safety. Participants also noted that Sevenoaks Park and Trelai Park were noisy, particularly due to nearby primary schools and traffic from surrounding roads making these



Figure 4. Participants playing on younger children’s equipment.



Figure 5. Ideas for elements of re-designed park spaces, highlighting social seating spaces and arrangements.

parks feel less relaxing for them. Safety concerns were prominent across all five parks, commonly associated with visibility. Lack of adequate lighting across all parks, which made participants feel unsafe in the evening and early mornings (particularly in winter months), discouraged park use after dark. Fears of crime such as sexual assault and being followed by men were a contributor. Several participants expressed discomfort with the number of dogs being walked, especially in Sevenoaks Park and Victoria Park, citing unease and fear related to unleashed dogs.

The lack of shelter and shade was highlighted in most park assessments as a major issue in all case-study parks, especially given the frequent wet weather in Cardiff, making it difficult to use park spaces comfortably year-round. Drainage problems cause flooding on footpaths, pitches, and MUGAs making them unusable. Narrow or no pavements, limited entrances and exits, a lack of circular walking routes, and poor connectivity were also cited as concerns related to accessibility and movement within Sevenoaks, Church Road, Trelai, and Maindy Parks, making TGYW feel unsafe or unwelcome. Other concerns linked to park aesthetics and included poorly maintained footpaths, cracks in pavements, litter, and a general lack of greenery and plants, which made participants feel uncomfortable and resulted in a score of two out of five in park assessments due to the amount of rubbish and vandalism.

Across the five parks and three schools, the most consistent concerns were the limited provision of age-appropriate facilities, male dominance of sports spaces, inadequate social seating and shelter, and safety concerns associated with lighting and visibility. These common themes were more prominent than clear differences between the schools' socio-economic contexts. Other barriers were more site-specific: dogs caused particular concern in Sevenoaks and Victoria Parks; noise was emphasised in Sevenoaks and Trelai Parks; and poor routes, entrances, or connectivity were identified in Sevenoaks, Church Road, Trelai, and Maindy Parks. The study was not designed to make systematic school-level comparisons, but the findings suggest that exclusion resulted from both recurring gendered design patterns and local park conditions.

Aspirations and user-informed recommendations for inclusive park design

Participants identified a broad range of aspirations and opportunities to make parks more inclusive, welcoming, accessible, safe, and engaging for TGYW. These suggestions reflect a collective ambition to reimagine parks not merely as recreational spaces but as environments that actively support their diverse needs and everyday experiences. As one participant expressed, there is a need for “a place to sit with shelter to socialise,” capturing the importance of spaces that enable comfort, sociability, and a sense of belonging.

First, a recurring proposal was the creation of dedicated spaces specifically for teenage girls. These areas were envisioned as venues for diverse activities, such as graffiti and street art, and that would serve as platforms for creative expression, foster social interaction, and provide exercise beyond traditional team sports, alongside more play equipment suitable for teenagers. Such spaces were seen as crucial to signalling that teenage girls are welcome and valued users of public parks to encourage more TGYW to be present in all parks (Figure 6). Participants argued in presenting their ideas that such spaces, in some cases dedicated specifically to TGYW (see also Figure 2 “Area for teens”), would promote a sense of ownership and belonging in parks that was currently absent, although debates emerged about the extent to which the proposed activities and/or spaces should be “segregated” for TGYW, discussed later.

Second, participants highlighted a range of physical design features that could improve the comfort and usability of parks for TGYW. The need for wider and smoother walkways and footpaths, described by some as “big pathways,” was frequently emphasised, particularly in Trelai and Sevenoaks Parks, where uneven surfaces were seen to restrict mobility and deter movement and play. Existing benches were often characterised as “uninviting, uncomfortable, or anti-social in design,” prompting calls for a greater variety of well-designed, clean, and well-maintained seating that could better support social interaction. Participants emphasised the importance of seating that is adaptable to different weather conditions and integrated with shelter and shade. There was also a strong emphasis on sheltered areas with lighting to enable year-round use. These design features were closely linked to broader aspirations for more varied activities, with participants expressing a desire for spaces to “sit with a book,” for “cute” and sociable seating, and for indoor or sheltered areas “for older kids to chill,” highlighting the importance of comfort, sociability, and age-appropriate design.



Figure 6. Extracts of vision boards for aspirations of inclusive park design.

Table 1. TGYW's proposals for enhancing inclusivity and safety in case study parks and ranked priorities for park improvements.

Park and Description	
Theme	Sevenoaks Park – Large featureless open space with small play area and MUGA. Maindy Park – Limited accessible green space; play area for u10's, a MUGA, and cycle track. Trelat Park – Large area of green space and playing fields, small play park, sports fields and changing rooms, and a skate park. Church Road Park – a small raised green space next to woodland with no play facilities. Victoria Park – Grade II listed and Green Flag park with large equipped playspace, splash pad, beach volleyball, tennis courts, refreshment kiosk, toilets, and baby changing facilities.
Dedicated spaces	Girls-only activities spaces – for relaxing, revising, picnics, dance, exercise. Girls-only spaces – for relaxing, revising, picnics, dance, exercise. Girls-only activities and concealed spaces. Teen-dedicated spaces. Teen-friendly zone. <i>Camping spaces and spaces for overnight activities.</i> Designated dog walking areas. Clean and inviting areas for sitting, eating, and socialising. Updated play equipment for teenagers: wider slides, tunnels, monkey bars, and diverse swing types. Girls-only zones.
Physical design features	Sheltered seating and pathways. Increased number, and varied design of social seating. Challenging play equipment for teenagers. “Hanging” equipment – e.g. monkey bars, ropes. Innovative and engaging swing designs. Larger and more diverse play equipment, expanded play areas. Innovative and engaging swing and seat designs. Sheltered seating for different weather conditions. Basketball/netball courts, book clubs, spaces for girls' sports. Park spaces to accommodate a wider range of users and activities. Additional swings and varied play elements More seating. Wider variety of sports (beyond football), fun and leisure activities, cafés or drink stations. Shelters and more seating. Relocation of existing skatepark to more suitable area. Reconfiguration of the rugby pitch, potentially splitting it to enable multiple uses. A playground tailored for teenagers, including larger swings, hammocks, roundabouts, and spinning bowls. Sheltered and inclusive spaces. Additional benches and picnic tables. Purpose-built roller skating and skateboarding areas. Activity zones incorporating rock climbing, sheltered areas, vending machines, equipment hire, improved sports facilities (e.g. football and basketball courts with better drainage), and outdoor fitness equipment. Natural features such as ponds and tree swings. A variety of seating types: larger benches, viewing areas, and quiet zones. Long, flat paths for roller skating, with equipment hire. Sheltered pathways and activity areas.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Park and Description			
Safety (High priority)	Enhanced lighting throughout the park. Soft and ambient lighting for safety and comfort. Dog control and enforcement.	Improved lighting to enhance safety for girls at night. More exits and entrances	Lighting in less visible or secluded areas such as woodlands, open fields, and riverside paths.
			Lighting designed to create a cosy and safe atmosphere.
Public facilities	Availability of toilets. Cafe Kiosk Food for purchase.	Clean toilets.	Creation of a dedicated youth hub with diverse features and activities. Ready-built barbecues or pizza ovens for shared use. Clean and well-maintained toilet facilities, with free sanitary products.
Aesthetics and ecology	General improvements to comfort and cleanliness. Planting of flowers and vegetation: vibrant and colourful; enhance aesthetic appeal.	More green space. Water features such as fountains or ornamental pools. Installation of soft, ambient lighting for comfort and safety. More vibrant and colourful planting.	Nice and circular seating, more places to sit, green space. Comfortable seating and picnic areas. Natural play materials. Integration of play into woodlands – e.g. tree swings.
Diverse activities	Diversify outdoor clubs – e.g. roller-skating, volleyball, badminton, dancing, and book clubs	Opportunities for dancing and expressive movement. Organised clubs, roller skating.	Outdoor cinema facilities. Water play or interactive water features. <i>Dancing, book clubs, BBQ.</i> <i>Dancing, track cycling, outdoor BBQs, skating and badminton.</i>
Governance and management	Cleaning – e.g. of seating and accessible toilets	Cleaning and maintenance. Optimisation of park spaces to cater for increased variety of uses.	Cleaning – e.g. seating and toilets.

Third, participants called for better lighting at different levels to improve visibility and reduce the fear of crime, harassment, and violence from other park users when it is dark, particularly in relation to Victoria and Trelai Parks. Interestingly, however, lighting was also envisioned as an aesthetic and atmospheric element to parks; for example, some participants wanted lighting to create “a cosy and safe atmosphere,” or wanted “soft and ambient lighting” (Table 1). The addition of routine park patrols was suggested to provide informal surveillance. Participants proposed the development of designated and enclosed dog-walking areas, where dogs could be let off leads without compromising the perceived safety or comfort of other park users. Fourth, participants emphasised the needs for “new toilets, cleaner with free sanitary products” (see Figure 7), as essential for improving comfort and supporting extended visits for TGYW.

Fifth, participants wanted more aesthetically appealing and ecologically responsive parks. They called for more intentional landscape design, enhanced greenery, and colourful planting schemes, especially in larger parks such as Sevenoaks, Maindy, and Victoria Parks. The addition of water features, such as ponds or fountains, was suggested to create a calming and visually engaging atmosphere that TGYW would like to spend time. These aesthetic improvements were seen not only as enhancing the sensory quality of the park experience but also as reinforcing the idea that public spaces can be welcoming and inclusive by design.

Sixth, participants advocated for a broader and more inclusive vision of how parks should function in the lives of TGYW. Parks were seen not only as places for physical activity but also as potential venues for studying, quiet reflection, socialising, and community events. Many participants emphasised the need for play equipment and recreational opportunities that reflected their age group and interests. A more diverse range of activities, including book clubs, dance classes, creative workshops, and sociable seating arrangements, were suggested to make parks more responsive to the lived realities of TGYW. Some suggested spaces and activities not typically seen in UK urban parks, including spaces for camping, tree swings, and BBQ areas (Table 1). Moreover, participants called for greater investment in sports facilities that extend beyond football and basketball, with suggestions including dance areas, tennis courts, roller-skating, and climbing structures, which would help to broaden participation and encourage physical activity among TGYW. Importantly, they did not exclude sports they perceived as dominated by

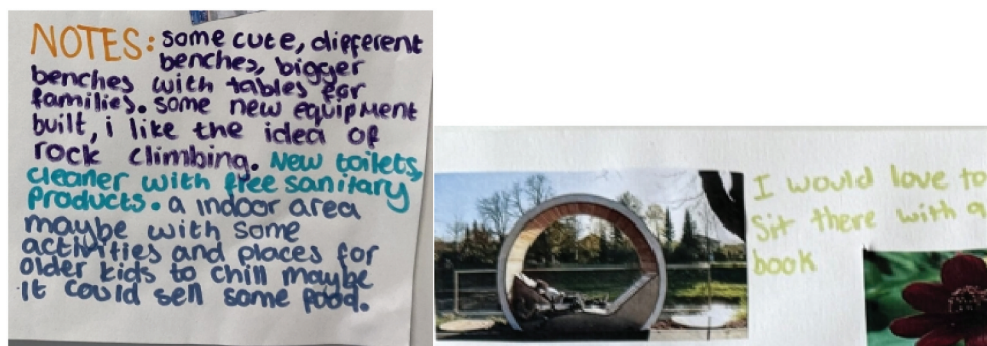


Figure 7. Extracts of vision boards and notes from TGYW on park designs.

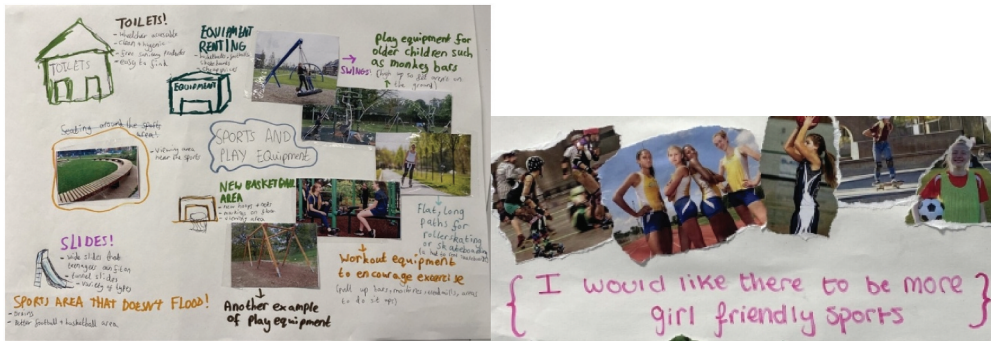


Figure 8. Extract of vision board emphasising the need for more girl-friendly sports and activities in parks.

boys (such as football and basketball) from their designs (Figure 8), but situated these alongside more diverse offerings of sport and exercise spaces.

Taken together, Table 1 suggests that a TGYW-friendly public space is defined not by one facility but by safety, comfort, sociability, choice, and recognition of teenage girls as legitimate park users. This requires age-appropriate activities, sheltered social seating, clean toilets, accessible routes, lighting, and flexible spaces that do not default to male-dominated sports. However, participants disagreed over whether inclusion required girls-only areas, raising questions about whether dedicated spaces challenge exclusion or reproduce gender segregation, as discussed below.

Prioritising park improvements

To conclude each workshop, participants were invited to rank their proposed improvements in terms of their priorities. This offered a valuable opportunity to better understand which interventions were seen as having the most immediate and meaningful impact on making parks more inclusive for TGYW. The combined results are summarised in Table 1, which outlines the high priorities (in **bold**) and low priorities (in *italics*) for the five parks.

Across all parks, interventions offering varied activities ensured engagement, safety, and accessibility, while governance and management consistently emerged as top priorities. Clean and accessible toilet facilities, improved lighting, and the creation of “girls-only” spaces and social zones were frequently emphasised as essential. Participants also prioritised the provision of spaces where girls could engage in sports and social activities without the dominance of boys or younger children, as well as better seating and shelter to support comfort and sociability.

Medium-priority improvements reflected a broader interest in well-being, social interaction, and recreational diversity, such as self-defence classes, cycle paths, cafés, and spaces for informal gathering. These were seen as desirable but not as urgent as the core concerns around lack of varied opportunities, safety, and maintenance. Low-priority items tended to include leisure or aesthetic additions, such as decorative planting, barbecues, and occasional-use amenities like camping areas, or sports perceived as less inclusive or accessible for TGYW, such as track cycling and tennis. These lower rankings suggest that while such features may enhance the overall park experience, they are not fundamental to

addressing the key and more immediate barriers currently limiting TGYW's engagement with public parks.

Discussion and conclusions

Segregation and “embedded” safety

It is these tensions with other users that we turn to first. Such tensions played out prominently in participants' suggestions for segregated and zoned spaces for TGYW, what we call “dedicated spaces,” manifesting variously in their designs from highly segregated “girls-only” spaces and activities, to arguably more widely defined “zones,” such as “teen-friendly” areas. Segregation could be applied in their designs to other park users, particularly dogs and dog owners, who were deemed threatening. Significantly, there was no simplistic pathway through which participants came to make these suggestions, nor were they entirely uncontested in group discussions. Suggestions for segregated zoning may have simply emerged from the layout of existing parks, where, for example, young children's play equipment, MUGAs and some sports areas are fenced from the rest of the park. Where others have critiqued conventional notions of women-only “safe spaces” as potentially reinforcing common problems of gendered segregation (Roestone Collective 2014), not least inscribing the public/private, male/female gendered binaries into spatial design, or might arguably fall into what others describe as “avoidance” strategies for dealing with young women's public safety (Starkweather 2007), our participants demonstrated that the conjoined processes of gendered social identity production and spatial production were far from straightforward. For many, the need for spaces to be “girls-only” was marked by the desire to have dedicated spaces away from those where boys and young men were perceived to dominate, and where therefore TGYW could not engage in the same activities (i.e. football, basketball, or skating) without feeling excluded by boys. Equally, spatial segregation was part of another element of identity production, particularly around age, as participants viewed other segregated park spaces as “baby parks” or “childish.” In some respects, notions of age- and gender-based social and spatial segregation were therefore reinscribed by our participants into their plans.

Arguably then, our participants' tendency to see the need for segregated zones for TGYW somewhat reinforces “exclusion by design” theories of public space (Barker et al. 2022; Beebeejaun 2016; Kern, 2020), in the sense that they reaffirm TGYW's own exclusion from other spaces, and, rather than find ways to make such spaces “inclusive,” carve out other exclusive zones in which their own identities can be performed safely, i.e. girls-only “safe spaces” (Roestone Collective 2014). Yet other participants contested these girls-only zones, arguing that available sports pitches were not inherently undesirable, but that access to them was unequally negotiated; some therefore suggested designated times for different genders. Dedicated spaces may challenge exclusion by visibly recognising TGYW's needs and providing respite from male-dominated environments, but they may also reinforce gendered segregation and the assumption that girls belong in separate spaces (Roestone Collective 2014). Planners should therefore neither treat girls-only provision as inherently emancipatory nor dismiss it as necessarily segregating. Context-sensitive dedicated areas may be appropriate where participants identify a need, but they should be

combined with measures that redistribute access to shared facilities, including diverse activities, flexible zoning, sociable layouts, and programmed or negotiated use. The aim should be to expand TGYW's choice and entitlement across the whole park, rather than confining inclusion to a designated zone. Participants' proposals for socialising, reading, dancing, climbing, roller skating, and ambient lighting similarly showed that safety, functionality, sociability, and identity were interconnected, enabling TGYW to claim space and develop a sense of belonging and agency (Pain 1997; Starkweather 2007; Young 1990).

Fundamentally, participants called for a shift in how parks are conceptualised, not merely as places for physical activity or passive recreation in a "safe space," but as spaces that accommodate a wider range of social, cultural, and creative practices. Professionals and existing evidence tend to focus on the "safety" aspects of girls and young women in public spaces (Fabre et al. 2019), whereas the desire for features such as outdoor cinemas, book clubs, street art zones, and quiet areas for reflection points to an expansive vision of park use that values emotional wellbeing, cultural expression, and informal gathering as much as exercise or sport. Such proposals challenge traditional notions of what constitutes "active" or "productive" use of public space and instead advocate for a more pluralistic and inclusive urban environment. However, TGYW should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Experiences and aspirations may vary by ethnicity, religion, socio-economic position, disability, sexuality, and patterns of park use, with these intersecting positions shaping perceptions of safety, belonging, and preferred forms of inclusion. Although the study involved schools serving ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities, it was not designed to compare these differences systematically and did not proactively recruit disabled or LGBTQ+ participants. Future co-design should therefore adopt explicitly intersectional recruitment and analysis, while also involving boys and young men to explore how equitable sharing of park space can be negotiated.

The work site of co-design

We began this paper by considering how the relational work of all genders that takes place across public space, not least park spaces, which focuses our attention on the active relational work done not just through inhabiting (or not) park spaces (i.e. the work of creating "safe spaces") but also on the potentials of co-design to act as a "work site" for more gender-inclusive parks. Our co-design process sought to engage TGYW in reshaping local parks, rather than treating them as passive users. The process drew out their own assessments, enabling them to articulate grounded, context-specific concerns. Through the process, participants appeared to become more attuned to how features, such as seating arrangements, lighting, vegetation, and the positioning of features, impacted their everyday use, and mapped, or not, onto their needs and desires. Through exposing them to diverse ideas from parks in other contexts (i.e. mood boards), they were encouraged to envision alternative uses that went beyond the visible and available in Cardiff parks. The participants did not simply express opinions and preferences, but actively shaped these, and each other's, through the collaborative design process, where they negotiated with one another in the final production of a design and debate the merits of other designs. The co-design approach therefore highlights some important advantages in hearing the voices and

ideas of TGYW that can be crowded out of more traditional participatory processes, and equally exposes how negotiations happen between TGYW.

The process itself therefore acted as a “work site” through which the work of negotiating what a TGYW’s space, or spatial preferences was carried out, drawing out significant differences of opinion. As opposed to more traditional design and analysis processes which treat TGYW as a passive user group, their direct involvement in the “work” of problem identification, critical interpretation, and design solutions, and the interpolation of physical and representational “sites” (the park itself and reproductions through iterations of designs). This sense of co-design as a “work site” for the relational work of TGYW highlights their involvement and participation, but that the process facilitates, and indeed encourages, relational work between TGYW themselves in negotiating a sense of what their identity as TGYW is and how it is spatially expressed. Indeed, such a co-design process was not inherently emancipatory, and, as we saw, may reproduce existing power imbalances and both existing and “new” forms of spatial segregation (Farr 2017). As with many such design-based projects, our project was speculative rather than driven by implementation across the parks selected, limiting its potential to be transformative in terms of young women’s sense of empowerment to impact decisions (Jiang et al. 2022), yet this does not diminish the “work being done” through the work site of co-design. There is indeed a need to view co-design as a negotiated (work) and context-bound (site-based) practice, rather than assuming participation alone guarantees empowerment. Indeed, as this project identified conflicts or tensions between TGYW and other park users (teenage boys, dog walkers, younger children), there remains work to be done by those who wish to facilitate co-designed solutions, to carefully manage the work site of co-design.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAA) under Grant number [ES/X004937/1] and Cardiff Council’s Child Friendly City Programme.

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