

Spencer Park and Recreation Ground

Park users and their views on developments

April 2021



The Friends of Spencer Park is a charitable organisation which aims to promote and develop Spencer Park and Recreation Area as a community asset. These developments are guided by demands within the local community to promote, maintain, and develop the park infrastructure in ways which are environmentally sustainable and conducive to the park neighbourhood. To gauge these demands this document draws on information from two surveys of users and potential users of Spencer Park and Recreation Area. The surveys, conducted in 2018 and 2020, provide guidance and help establish priorities for the continuing efforts of the Friends of Spencer Park to meet their aims.

I extend thanks to Lisa Odedra, who designed and managed the 2020 survey, and to the Friends of Spencer Park who contributed their ideas and assisted with delivery of both surveys and commented on earlier drafts of this report. Special thanks are due to all the respondents who gave their time to express their views and opinions about the park developments, both past and planned.

Peter Elias
April 10th, 2021

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Summary

This report draws on information collected via two surveys. The first was a short enquiry held in 2018, designed to provide some initial guidance to the Friends of Spencer Park as they move forward plans for the further development of park facilities. The second, held in 2020, was longer and more detailed, seeking to elaborate on these plans.

The report is presented in thirteen sections. These provide information about park visitors and their usage of the park. The main section presents information provided by survey respondents about the planned refurbishment of the Edwardian pavilion in the park, a refurbishment that would provide a café, community space and improved toilet facilities. Other sections report on the tennis and bowls facilities, the gardens, and for developments that would be positioned in the section of the park on the North side of Spencer Road, the 'Recreation Area'. Among its many findings, the information provided in this report suggests the following:

- There is strong support from existing park users for the redesign of the interior of the pavilion to provide: a community café serving hot and cold drinks and snacks; a community meeting space and art gallery; and improved toilet facilities. The potential demand to serve park visitors with hot and cold drinks and snacks in a peaceful environment is high.
- The continuing and growing interest in membership of the community tennis club looks set to provide a steady income stream that will support the replacement of nets, fencing and ultimately the resurfacing of the courts. Coupled with the proposed new café and toilets, upkeep of the tennis courts will sustain and most probably lead to increased membership in future years.
- The crown green depends for its maintenance on the support of the Albany Club. The 2020 survey provided evidence that some users are critical of the enclosed and currently unused flat green area and were keen to see this area released for other uses.
- The work that has been done by the Friends of Spencer Park to maintain and develop the flowers and shrubs in the park is widely praised, recognised by users as an attractive feature of the park and one which should be continued.
- Many users expressed their desire to see some development of park facilities in the larger part of Spencer Park termed the 'recreation area'. Ideas for development included a multi-use games area, a basketball pitch, better football markings and adult gym equipment. These developments could be coupled with the perceived need by survey respondents to do more to address for what is termed the 'demographic gap' in the provision of park facilities for age groups not currently catered for, notably pre-teens, teenagers, and young adults. More information from these age groups is needed to inform such developments.
- The surveys provide evidence that the activity days and events organised by the Friends of Spencer Park are widely enjoyed and should continue.

1. Introduction

1.1 Spencer Park was formally opened in 1883, on land donated to the people of Coventry by David Spencer in 1882. As well as providing much needed green space in a densely populated residential area, the park provides sporting facilities, recreational play areas for children and attractive shrubs, flowers, and trees for all to enjoy. In the centre of the park is the Edwardian pavilion, constructed in 1915, originally designed to provide changing facilities, showers, and toilets for park users. The park is owned and maintained by Coventry City Council.

1.2 The reduction in central government funds to local government from 2010/11 onwards led to major cuts in Council expenditure on parks, including the closure of the Spencer Park pavilion. To avoid the loss of this important asset to the local community, the *Friends of Spencer Park* (FOSP) was formed in 2012 to promote the park by providing a range of activities and facilities for people across Coventry.

1.3 In 2017 the FOSP became a registered charity, which aims to *'provide or assist in the provision of facilities for recreation and other leisure time occupation in the interests of health and social welfare with the object of improving the conditions of life of the inhabitants of Coventry in particular but not exclusively by the preservation promotion and improvement of Spencer Park Coventry'*¹.

1.4 To date the FOSP have been successful in securing funds and building partnerships, enabling the reopening of the tennis courts, maintaining the bowling greens, establishing two new recreational areas for children, providing benches and tables, and organising community activities in the park. Use of the park by a wide range of age groups, with many now from outside the local area, has increased significantly as a result.

1.5 The Friends are keen to continue the success of their work by undertaking further developments, guided by public demand. Two surveys have been commissioned to provide such guidance. The first, held in 2018, focussed mainly on plans for the refurbishment of the pavilion. The second, which ran from December 2019 to September 2020, provided scope for more detailed responses. This survey elaborated on the demand for the variety of services provided within the park and recreation area, and on the proposed pavilion café, community space and art gallery.

1.6 This report draws together the findings from both surveys to inform the proposed refurbishment of the pavilion and the development of other resources within the park.

¹ The Friends of Spencer Park is registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) with the Charities Commission. The aims of the CIO are as stated in its constitution.

2. The nature of the surveys

2.1 The first survey of users of Spencer Park was held in Spring 2018. This paper-based survey was brief, consisting of a few questions on one A4 sheet of paper. Respondents were asked about their reasons for using the park, their interest in joining community clubs (including the Friends of Spencer Park), plans for development of the Edwardian pavilion in the park, and their interests in regular park-based activities.

2.2 A total of 86 people participated in the survey, with approximately half of those being surveyed while attending the Earlsdon Festival in May 2018. Other respondents were attendees at an event in the park also held in May by the Friends of Spencer Park.

2.3 The second survey was an online enquiry, consisting of approximately 60 questions, covering topics such as reasons for using the park, frequency of visits, desired café services, awareness of and use of other park facilities, and the potential use of a community space. Importantly, this survey encouraged open-ended text responses through which respondents could raise issues they felt had not been covered elsewhere in the survey. Responses to the second survey were obtained from 249 people over a period of 9 months, with approximately two thirds replying in February and March 2020, immediately prior to lockdown 1.0, and one third in the period from July to September 2020, prior to lockdown 3.0. This survey, promoted via social media, had greater geographical coverage than the 2018 enquiry.

3. Why do people use the park?

3.1 In the 2018 survey, respondents were presented with a choice of six main reasons why they used the park. Many chose more than one main reason. These are all included in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Main reasons given for using the park – 2018 survey

Main reasons for using the park	% of respondents
Just to enjoy the park	49
To use the children's play equipment	41
To use the hard standing with markings	23
Tennis	17
Dog-walking	16
Green bowling	13

Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2018.

Note: No. of respondents= 86; No. of reasons selected = 137.

3.2 The 2020 survey expanded the number of main reasons people could choose to describe their use of the park. Again, multiple choices were made. Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents selecting each reason.

Table 2 Main reasons given for using the park – 2020 survey

Main reasons for using the park	% of respondents
For children to use the play areas	53
Personal leisure time	18
Socialising with friends	16
To play bowls	18
Dog walking	10
Picnics	8
For exercise	17
To play tennis	12
Community gardening	1

Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020.

Note: No. of respondents= 249; No. of reasons selected = 383.

3.3 Given the differences in coverage and the changes to the choices presented to respondents, the results are not directly comparable. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the combined categories 'Personal leisure time', 'Socialising with friends' and 'Picnics' constitute 42 per cent of reasons in 2020, not too dissimilar from the proportion stating 'Just to enjoy the park' in 2018. The apparent decline in tennis as a main reason probably reflects the closure of the tennis courts because of Covid restrictions for a significant part of the 2020 survey period. Statistics from the Tennis Club membership and booking system indicate that the demand for tennis at Spencer Park is stronger than ever². Dog walking was given as their main reason by between one in six and one in ten of the respondents in the surveys.

² Since opening in 2016, the community tennis club maintained its annual membership at approximately 60 – 70 families per year prior to 2020. Despite restrictions on numbers playing in 2020, 190 new or renewed family memberships were taken out. In just two weeks since the courts reopened at the end of March 2021, more than 90 family memberships have been enrolled.

4. Where do park visitors come from?

4.1 The park attracts visitors mainly from its immediate locality, but with a minority living some distance away. While the surveys cannot claim to yield hard evidence of this given that the 2018 survey was conducted in two locations, one of which was outside the park, and the 2020 survey was distributed primarily by social media, the geographical disposition of respondents to the two surveys is remarkably similar. Based upon the first part of their postcode addresses, the table below shows the distribution of respondents by the broad geographical areas where they live. Unsurprisingly, by far most respondents were local (CV5 postcode district).

Table 3 Residential locations of park visitors, 2018 and 2020 surveys

Postcode district	Location	% of respondents	
		2018 survey	2020 survey
CV5	West Coventry	63	67
CV3	South Coventry	10	11
CV1	City centre	9	7
CV2	North East Coventry	5	3
CV6	North Coventry	5	3
CV4	East Coventry	4	3
CV7	North West Coventry	2	2
CV8	Kenilworth, Burton Green	2	2

Sources: Spencer Park User Surveys, 2018 and 2020

4.2 Almost one fifth of respondents live in areas near CV5 (CV3 - South Coventry and CV1 - the city centre area). More than half of respondents to the 2020 survey regarded Spencer Park as their main park and almost two thirds of respondents stated that they usually walked to the park, the remainder visited by car. The 2020 survey asked respondents whether Spencer Park was the main park that they used. Over half (55 per cent) stated that this was the case, with the Memorial Park being named as the next most frequent main park.

4.3 The residential locations of respondents to the 2020 survey are shown in Map 1, which clearly shows their preponderance in the south and west of the City of Coventry.

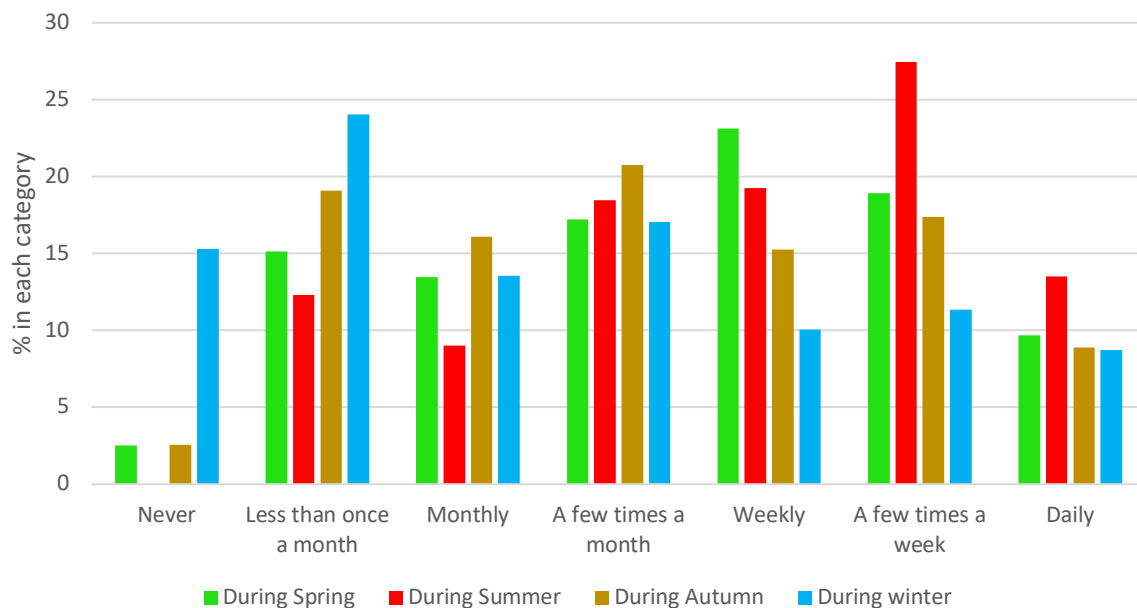
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5. When do people visit the park and for how long do they stay?

5.1 Respondents to the 2020 survey were asked how frequently they visited the park in each season of the year. Figure 1 shows that park usage is highest in the Spring and Summer, with more than a quarter of respondents visiting the park a few times a week in Summer. Usage falls away in Winter, but even then, more than 20 per cent of respondents stated that they visited the park at least weekly. There is a small group, probably dog walkers, who visit daily in every season.

Figure 1 Frequency of park visits by season



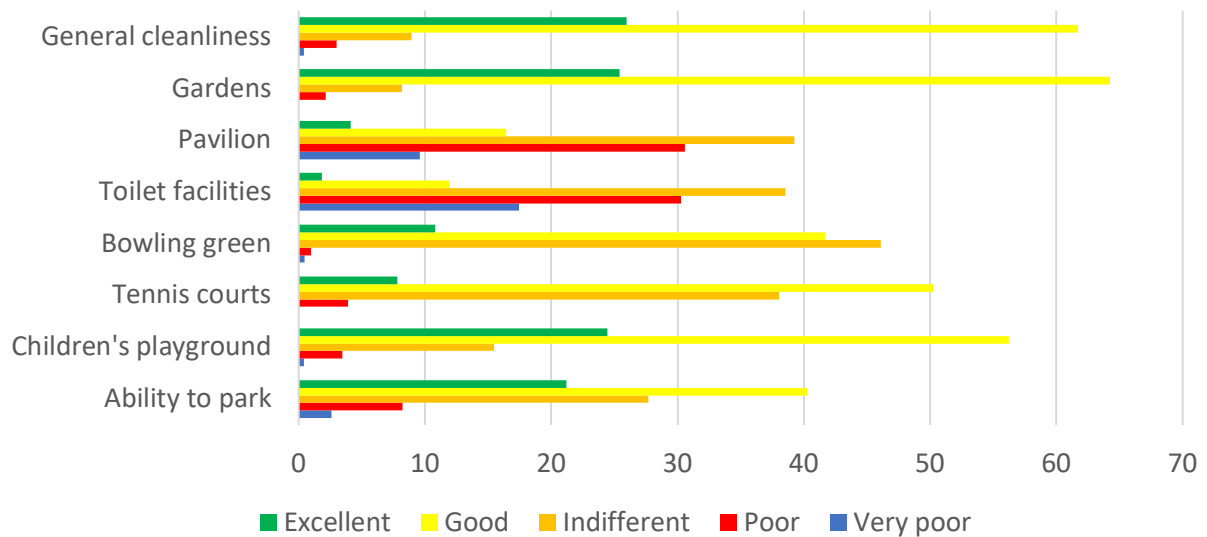
Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

5.2 When asked how long they stayed on each visit, approximately one third stated that their visit usually lasted 30 minutes to one hour, and over a half stayed for an hour or more.

6. Current views on park facilities

6.1 The 2020 survey asked respondents to rate eight aspects of the park on a scale ranging from 'Excellent' to 'Very poor'. The results are shown in Figure 2, indicating that the most highly rated features of the park at present are the general cleanliness of the park, the gardens and the children's playground. The worst rated features are the pavilion (40 % poor or very poor) and the toilets (48% poor or very poor).

Figure 2 Respondent ratings of Spencer Park and its facilities



Note: horizontal axis shows the percentage in each rating
Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

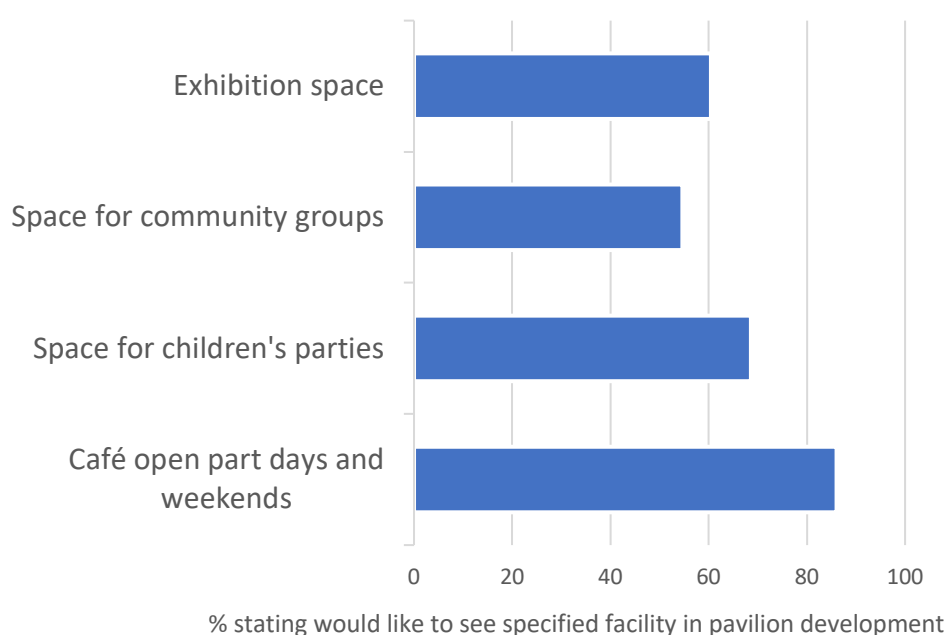
7. Future developments in the park

7.1 In the 2018 survey, respondents were invited to comment on plans for the development of the Edwardian pavilion in the park. They did so by ticking boxes next to the following statements:

- *A café that would open for part of each day and weekends*
- *A space that can be used for children's parties / family gatherings possibly with catering*
- *A space that could be hired by community groups for various activities i.e. exercise classes rehearsal space etc.*
- *Exhibition space for arts crafts sculpture exhibitions*

7.2 Figure 3 displays the results. Most respondents ticked 2 or 3 boxes. The most popular choice was for a café that would open part of each day and weekends, followed by space for children's parties. Development of the pavilion to provide exhibition space for arts, crafts and sculpture, and space for community groups also commanded a good deal of support

Figure 3 Views on what should be included in plans for pavilion development



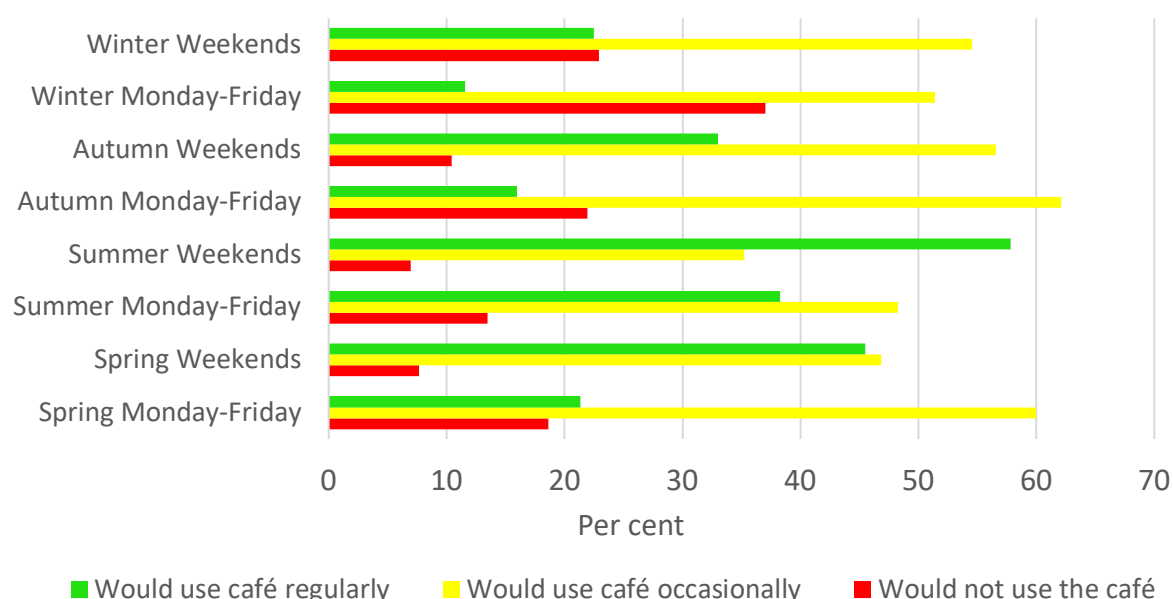
Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2018

7.3 The 2020 survey explored further the potential demand for café services within the park. A specific question asked, '*If a cafe were to open in the Pavilion would you use Spencer Park more frequently than you do now?*'. Just over 80 per cent of respondents replied positively.

7.4 Figure 4 shows the replies to questions about usage of a café by weekdays/weekends and by seasons. Interestingly, the percentage of users who stated that they would use the café regularly seldom falls below 20 per cent. Maximum usage was anticipated for Spring Weekends and in Summer.

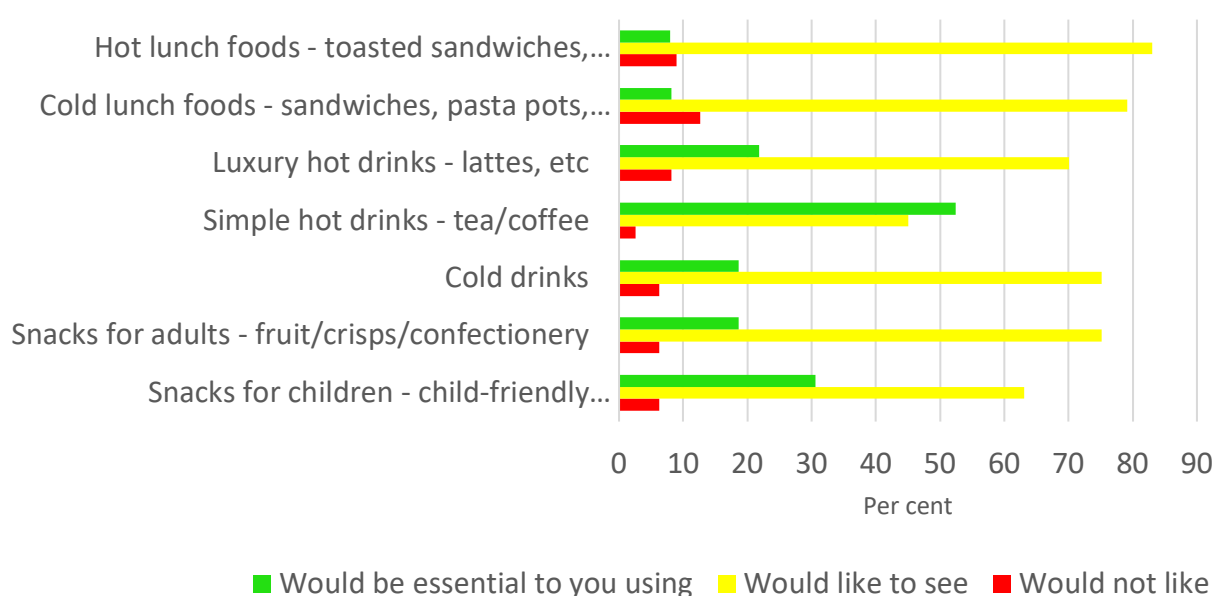
7.5 A café in the pavilion could be organised in several ways, from one just serving basic hot drinks, to a café with hot and cold snacks for lunch. To gain some indication of user preferences, respondents to the 2020 survey were presented with a list of options in terms of what the café should serve. They could indicate their preferences for any or all these options. The responses are given in Figure 5. While simple hot drinks are deemed essential by most respondents, hot and cold lunch foods are clearly menu items that many would like to see.

Figure 4 Anticipated usage of a café in the pavilion



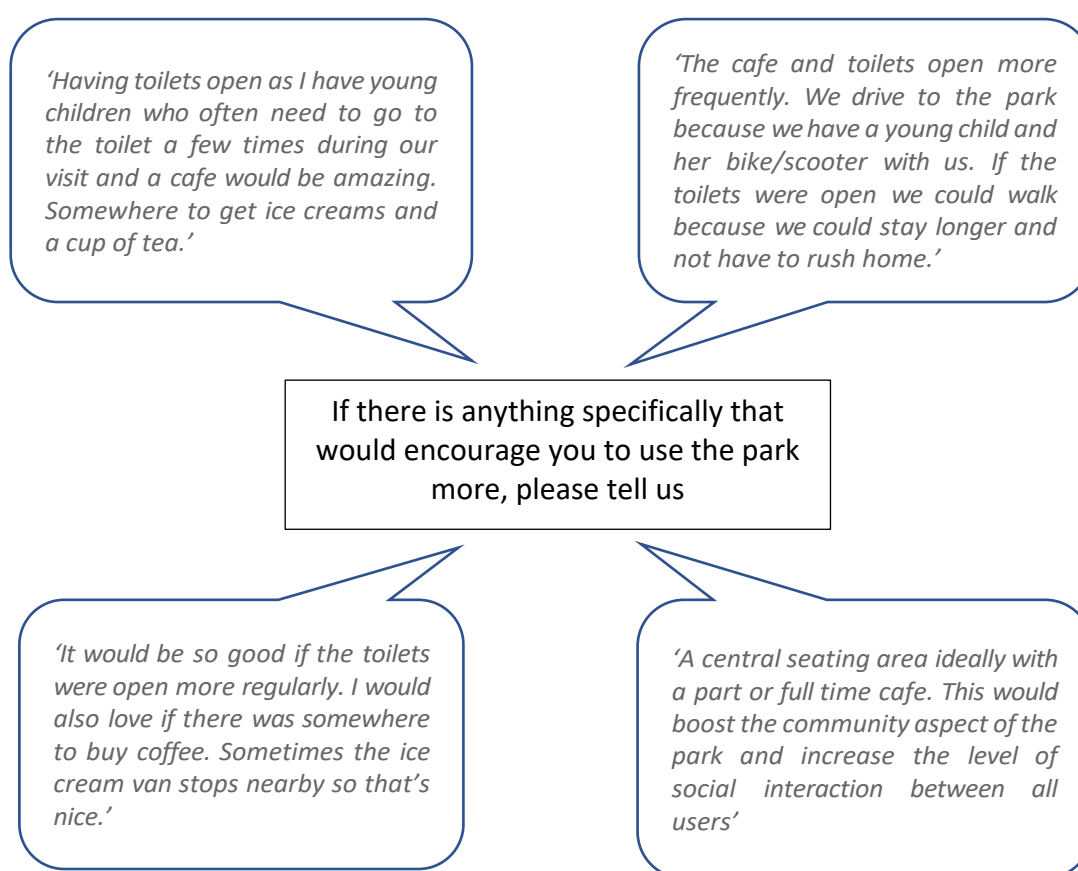
Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

Figure 5 What should the café serve?



Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

7.6 Refurbishment of the pavilion provides more than just a café for park users, a point that was not missed by survey respondents. As was shown in Figure 3, the 2018 survey indicated strong support for the refurbishment to provide spaces for community groups, children's parties and for local exhibitions. The demand for these was investigated in the 2020 survey, but before turning to this evidence, it is worth noting the major addition to requirements stated by respondents to the 2020 survey. An open-ended question in this survey asked, *'if there was anything specifically that would encourage you to use the park more'*. The response to this question allowed for free text and one half of all respondents took advantage of this to provide more detail about the facilities that would increase their usage of the park. Three items dominate their responses: a café, toilets, and better facilities for older children. Typical of comments on the first two of these items are the following:



Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

7.7 Just over half the survey respondents replied to this question by outlining the facilities that would encourage them to visit more often and/or stay longer at each visit. Out of 126 respondents who provided such information, 72 mentioned a café, 32 stated that toilets were a basic requirement and 9 mentioned the need for facilities for older children.

8. The pavilion as a community space

8.1 To gain some indication of the potential demand for a community space within a refurbished pavilion, respondents to the 2020 survey were asked: *'If the pavilion was to be refurbished to have an open plan room for hire upstairs and a seated area downstairs do you think you would be interested in hiring this for any events?'* More than half of respondents (52%) responded positively to this question. They were then presented with an open-ended question asking how much they would be willing to pay per hour to hire such a space for events. Some remarked that this would depend upon the available space. However, most replied with an amount per hour, with the average (median) being in the range of £20 to £30 per hour. This is indicative of the usual rates that people had paid locally to hire spaces, with one third of respondents indicating that they had hired spaces for events in the locality of Spencer Park within the last two years.

9. The gardens, shrubberies, and green space

9.1 There were no specific questions placed in the two surveys which related to development of the gardens and shrubberies. However, many respondents used an open-ended question at the end of each questionnaire to make comments on these. Typical of these are the following:

'I appreciate the work put into the gardens looking so nice in the spring by your volunteers.'

'We appreciate the bike circuit for children and the way in which the gardens are maintained beautifully by volunteers'

'More flowers...'

'We adore the garden and the bug hotel – great work!'

'The lady that does the gardening does a fantastic job. - Thank you for upkeep of park, cutting grass and flowers.'

'It's an oasis, a wonderful facility and one of my most enjoyable spaces in Coventry'

9.2 Some reflected on the larger recreation area:

'Rather than swathes of grass in the big park, maybe there could be areas of meadow wildflower planted...'

'I walk through it and enjoy the green space...'

'We enjoy walking through it and sometimes running through it.'

10. The Recreation Area

10.1 The 2020 survey contained a section that commenced with the question: *‘Thinking about the large park over the road from the main Spencer Park containing the pavilion. Do you use this park?’* Almost half of respondents (46%) replied positively to this question. They were asked to describe their usage via an open-ended question. Their responses fall into four groups, in order of frequency:

- walking and exercise generally, excluding dog walking (35%);
- dog walking (20%);
- ball games, including basketball, football and cricket (17%);
- picnics (7%).

10.2 Some respondents commented more specifically:

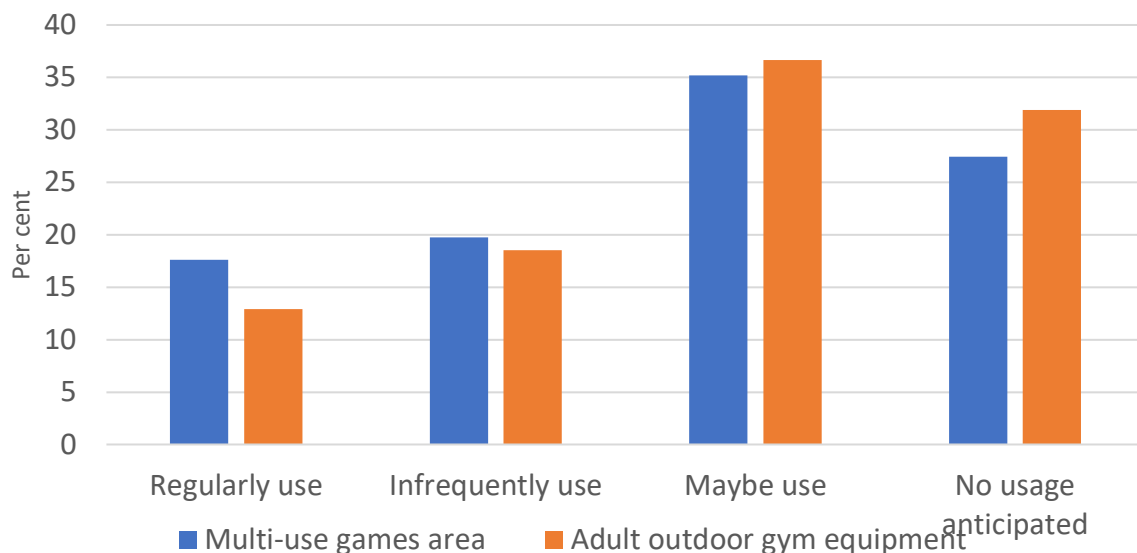
‘On the large Spencer, the basketball facilities should be improved. Only one hoop but it’s very popular. Would be great to have a full court.’

‘Five aside football pitch’

‘More park equipment’

10.3 All respondents were asked specific questions about how they would like to see this area developed. Figure 6 shows the two options they were presented with and their reactions to these:

Figure 6 Anticipated use of two new facilities in the Recreation Area



Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

10.4 A multi-use games area, or ‘muga’ would be more marginally more popular, with over one third of all respondents stating that they might use such a facility regularly or infrequently, compared with just under one third stating that they might make similar use of adult outdoor gym equipment.

11. Tennis and bowls

11.1 The 2018 survey asked respondents if they were interested in joining the Community Tennis Club, with 37 per cent responding positively, whereas interest in joining the Albany Club bowls was expressed by 13 per cent.

11.2 The information presented in Tables 1 and 2 showed that a significant number of park users came into the park to play tennis or bowls. The 2020 survey explored this further with specific questions about awareness of these facilities within the park. The questions put to respondents were:

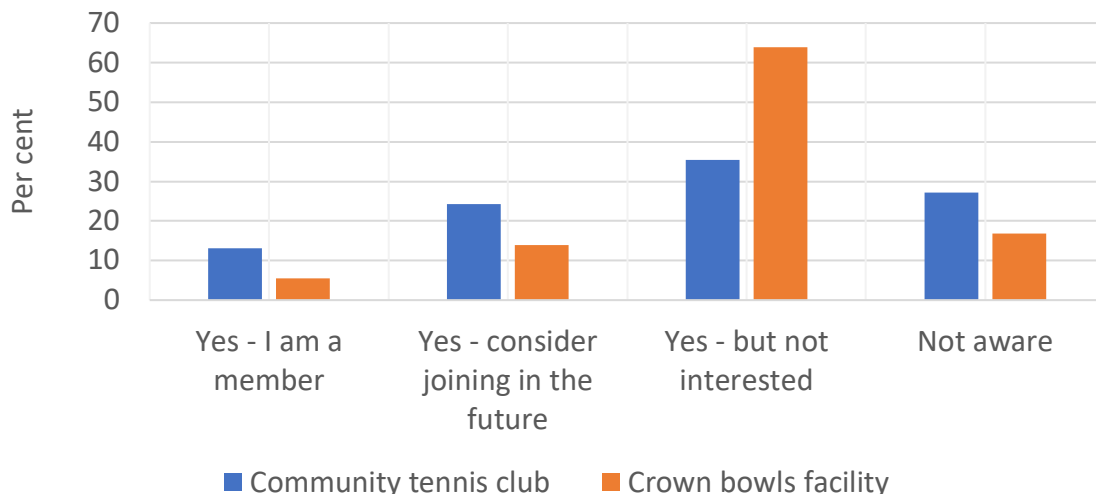
Are you aware that tennis coaching and membership of a community tennis club is available at the park?

and

Are you aware that crown bowls facilities are available at the park and that it is the home of the Albany Club bowls team?

11.3 Figure 7 shows the responses to these questions. Awareness of the crown bowls facility is higher than that of the tennis club, but interest in and membership of the tennis club is higher among respondents to the 2020 survey.

Figure 7 Awareness of tennis and crown green bowls in Spencer Park



Source: Spencer Park User Survey 2020

Next to the crown green is the flat green, which was used by the Albany club until 2020. Some respondents to the 2020 survey were critical of its current underutilisation:

'50% of the park area is down to bowling greens. Quite often nobody is ever playing bowls. It would be better to balance and address the wider demographics of the community and turn one green to a skate park for older children.'

'Change one of the bowling greens into recreation area for young people, e.g., football pitch, basketball court etc.'

'Think second bowls green is a waste...the main one isn't used that much.'

'Flat bowling green has been advertised with sign as having thousands of pounds spent on it, but it is unused or used so infrequently and in bad condition. However, fence means no one can use it - could be utilised with a membership model for dog walkers/dog classes or as exercise space to make money on it.'

12. A 'demographic gap' in the groups the park caters for?

12.1 The 2018 survey included a question about organised activities. Three such activities were suggested, 'Farmer's markets', 'Tabletop sales' and 'Organised games', together with a request for ideas to be written on the survey form. 'Farmers' markets' proved to be the most popular suggestion, with 71% of respondents indicating their interests. 'Tabletop sales' was the next most popular choice (57%), followed by 'Organised games' at 45%. Thirteen respondents requested 'Other activities' and gave a written response. These responses were varied, covering activities which provide exercise for children and adults, provision of a skate park and sale of alcoholic drinks.

12.2 The 2020 survey did not suggest any specific activities, leaving it up to respondents to indicate what could be done to increase their usage of the park. While the demand for a café and improved toilet facilities dominated their responses, there was evidence of a 'demographic gap' in the groups the park catered for. Young people need places where they can meet in safety, where they can exercise and socialise. Currently the park caters for children mainly in the age range 2 to 8 years. Pre-teens, teenagers and young adults would benefit from a café, especially if it provided them with free Wi-Fi, but other ideas put forward included the following:

'More things to attract teenagers e.g., exercise equipment, table tennis table etc.'

'Quite often nobody is ever playing bowls. It would be better to balance and address the wider demographics of the community and turn one green to a skate park for older children.'

'Change one of the bowling greens into recreation area for young people, e.g., football pitch, basketball court etc.'

'A better play area for older children (skateboard park or more grown-up play area for 6+)'

'Facilities for slightly older children, my daughter is 6 and has just about outgrown the play area.'

12.3 This is an area that requires further exploration. The two surveys providing the evidence for this report did not target young people, nor were any questions directed specifically at park users in their pre-teen, teenage years, or young adulthood. This is a significant gap in knowledge that could, if addressed, have an impact upon further developments in Spencer Park and Recreation Ground.

13. Conclusions

13.1 Two surveys, conducted two years apart and using different methods for sampling and data collection, provide a remarkably consistent picture of the users of Spencer Park, their expectations of what the park could provide and their appreciation of the park itself. The overall message is extremely positive, with much praise for the work of the Friends of Spencer Park and commendations for the efforts that have been made over the past few years to improve the park environment.

13.2 However, the purpose of this report based on the two surveys is not simply to provide supporting evidence for the work that the Friends of Spencer' Park have undertaken to date, but to guide the future development of the park. Here again there are consistent messages from the two surveys that support the following developments:

Refurbishment of the pavilion

13.3 There is strong support among existing park users for the redesign of the interior of the pavilion, to provide a community café serving hot and cold drinks and snacks, a community meeting space and art gallery, and toilets. Demand for café services looks to remain stable at weekends throughout the year, and through weekdays and weekend in Spring and Summer. Views were expressed to suggest that people would visit more frequently and stay longer as a result.

Tennis and bowls

13.4 A continuing and growing interest in membership of the community tennis club looks set to provide a steady income stream that will support the replacement of nets, fencing and ultimately the resurfacing of the courts. Coupled with the proposed new café and toilets, upkeep of the tennis courts will sustain and probably increase membership in future years.

13.5 The two surveys provide some evidence of an increased interest in bowls between 2018 and 2020, with approximately one in five of respondents expressing interest in this activity in 2020. However, the interest is predominantly in crown green bowling. The crown green depends for its maintenance on the support of the Albany Club, which looks set to continue. The flat green is underused and some respondents to the 2020 survey were critical of what they regarded as space that could be used for other activities.

Gardens and shrubs

13.6 The work that has been done to maintain and develop the flowers and shrubs in the park is widely recognised by users as an attractive feature of the park and one which should be continued.

The Recreation Area

13.7 Many users expressed their desire to see some development of park facilities in the larger part of Spencer Park termed the 'recreation area'. Ideas for development included a multi-use games area, a basketball pitch, better football markings and adult gym

equipment. These developments could be coupled with the perceived need by survey respondents to do more to address for what is termed the 'demographic gap' in the provision of park facilities – the need to provide for age groups not currently catered for, notably pre-teens, teenagers, and young adults. More information from these age groups is needed to inform such developments.

Organised activities

13.8 The surveys provide evidence that the activity days and events organised by the Friends of Spencer Park are widely enjoyed and should continue.