

Making Our Open Spaces Safer

1. Background

Part of BOSF's role is to identify the issues that have an impact on:

- the way Birmingham's open spaces are used and viewed
- the effectiveness and satisfaction of the volunteers that look after those spaces.

This report has been generated from a survey of 46 Friends of Parks groups in Birmingham.

Crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) have a direct impact on how these spaces are viewed and used and how volunteers feel about the spaces they care for.

Birmingham's Community Safety Partnership has identified crime and ASB in parks and open spaces as one of their targets for 2017-2018.

BOSF's survey results will be used to help develop new partnerships and new ways of working so that volunteers, agencies and landowners can tackle crime and ASB more effectively during this period of austerity.

2. Crime, Anti-Social Behaviour and just plain annoying

The first step in the process is to identify the behaviours that cause problems. These range from:

- serious crime – e.g. violence, prostitution, drug sales
- anti-social behaviour – e.g. actions that cause or are likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress – which may or may not be deliberate – bad language, large groups of people
- careless behaviour – e.g. litter, dog poo, bad parking
- something one person doesn't like and another person does – e.g. loud music, cycling

The next step is to quantify how widespread the issues are thought to be.

When asked the question "do you have problems with crime or ASB?" 100% of sites said "yes".

When asked to look at the open source crime statistics for their site 46% said the report was about right but 50% said it underestimated the amount of crime in their park or open space.

These results underline that crime, ASB and careless behaviours are felt to be widespread and under-reported.

2.1 Which issues cause problems?

Litter and Dog Poo

There is no surprise that the survey results say that 98% and 93%, respectively, of sites have a problem with dog poo and litter. More encouraging is that for 48% (dog poo) and 38% (litter) it's only a problem some of the time.

Crime

Aggressive dogs, drugs, prostitution, violence and intimidation are seen as problems, all the time, by relatively few sites. However in the severity/frequency equation (see below) for these issues even low numbers are unacceptable.

- 5% of sites have a problem with violence and intimidation all the time.

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- 12% of sites have a problem with drug use and 8% with drug sales all the time.
- 3% of sites have issues with prostitution all the time.
- 62% have problems some of the time with drug selling and 69% with drug use.
- Aggressive dogs, motorbikes/mini motos and fire are a problem, some of the time, for 61%, 63% & 77% of sites respectively.

Property crime...graffiti, abandoned cars, damage to plants, buildings & play areas

These are the crimes that make an open space feel unsafe without being a direct threat to visitors and volunteers.

- 36% of sites have a problem, some of the time, with abandoned cars
- 56%, some of the time, with graffiti
- 49% with damage to/theft of/from plants, buildings and play areas
- Fly tipping and water pollution were also reported

And then there are the issues that may or may not be anti-social behaviour or crimes...

- 68% of sites have a problem with bikes going too fast or in the “wrong” place – with 17% having this problem all the time.
- Inappropriate or bad language – 66% of sites some of the time
- Gangs or large groups of people – 69% of sites some of the time
- Remote control toys, drones, ball games, metal detectorists
- Portable barbeques
- Thoughtless parking
- Fireworks
- Leaving food for animals
- Rough sleeping

There are no surprises in the responses about when problems are at their worst; evenings, sunny weekends, just after school and the school holidays.

2.2 Understanding frequency and severity

When it comes to allocating resources to tackle crime and ASB each behaviour needs to be reviewed in terms of **frequency** and **severity**.

As can be seen from the results above behaviours with potentially catastrophic results (e.g. violence) are infrequent.

What matters, once the most serious crimes have been dealt with, are the behaviours that have a negative impact on how an open space is viewed. If a park or open space has a reputation as a site with a high level of drug use then fewer people will use the site and the negative behaviours will increase.

But even low level nuisance (litter, dog poo or poorly controlled dogs) can have an impact on people willing to use the open space.

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3. Getting Help, Making Open Spaces Safer

3.1 Parks Service

78% of respondents have reported problems to the Parks Service. Of those;

- 45% of those said that the Parks Service was able to help
- 55% said they weren't.

Some respondents thought that certain issues were beyond the Parks Service remit – fly-tipping, mopeds, national cycle route.

Others felt that cuts to funding meant that activities like gate locking, litter collection and grass cutting, that might make a site safer, have been withdrawn.

Several respondents recognised that “crime” is the remit of the police and not the Parks Service.

Action Point 1: Which agency is the best place to report which problems? When do you contact the Parks Service, the police or other agencies?

3.2 Contacting the Police

West Midlands Police have re-introduced their neighbourhood police model after a short break – so each park or open space should have a Neighbourhood Police Team (NPT).

89% of respondents say they have been in touch with their NPT. Of those groups who haven't made contact;

- 50% don't know who they are
- 25% don't know how to contact them
- 50% say they don't respond to emails/phone calls

Action Point 2: Provide Friends groups with contact details for NPT, fire service and other agencies

Of the groups who have contacted their NPT;

- 77% made contact when they have a problem
- 10% have the NPT at their meetings
- 15% bump in to them in the neighbourhood
- 33% at a ward or tasking meeting

3.3 Dialling 999 and 101

Knowledge about when to use the 101 number rather than 999 is patchy among park users and volunteers.

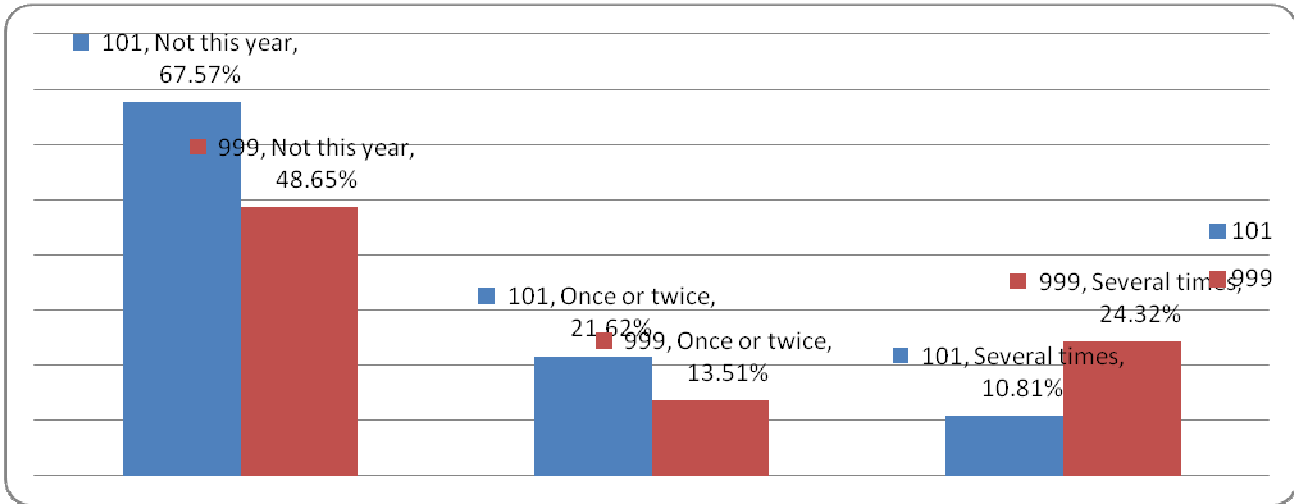
999 should be used when a crime is in progress, when there is danger to life or when violence is being used or threatened.

101 can be used to report damage to property, anti-social behaviour or theft. 101 is particularly useful if a park or open space is suffering from a spate of ASB. Regular reporting of all incidents help the police identify patterns (e.g time of day/location/repeat “offenders”) and target patrols accordingly.

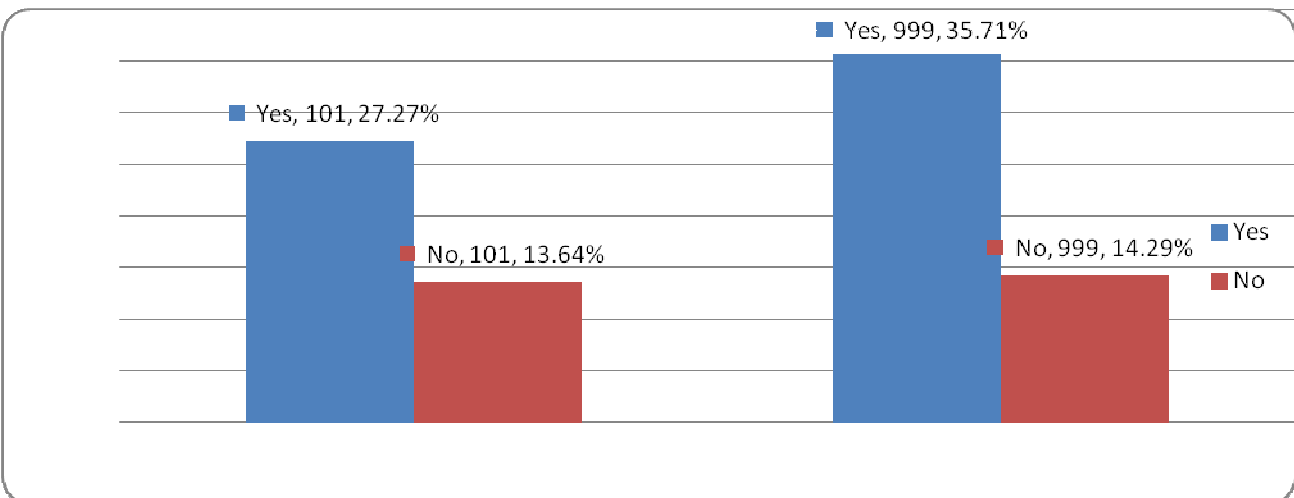
Action Point 3: Provide friends groups and park users with information about when to use 101 or 999

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Have you dialled 999/101 in the last year?



Were you happy with the response to the 999/101 calls?



When responding to the questions about ringing 101 or 999 issues raised included:

- the time it takes for the calls to be answered
- difficulty finding open spaces' addresses and where in the open space the problem is happening
- finding it difficult to explain the problem – not always obvious when crimes are not in the domestic sphere

“101 is not an efficient way of reporting incidents.”

“They never pick up.”

“After 60 minutes of trying to get through we gave up”

4. Beyond dialling 101 or 999 – Comments on responses to ongoing problems

“Police are unable to set up outreach and patrols at the times needed.”

“Advised that we fell between two community police teams and nobody had been patrolling”

“Solutions are temporary”

Survey responses noted the reduction in the frequency of patrols in recent years – recognising the reduction in resources going to the police.

Several responses identified that police presence often only solved problems whilst the police were on site or for a short period after increased patrols e.g after reports of muggings.

This means that increased patrols are not a panacea. Unpredictable patrols may deter crime and ASB but other solutions will be needed unless police are to be permanently stationed in a parks and open spaces!

5. Self Help – Volunteers Making a Difference

“We don't "report" problems to Parks. We tell them and discuss issues but we deal with most problems ourselves.”

Friends groups, by their very nature, are made up of people who don't wait for other organisations to solve problems. There are plenty of examples of Friends groups who have introduced projects or actions to make their sites safer.

From the recognition that busy spaces are safer spaces;

“... [we] just try to fill the park with people doing positive things”

To fully funded projects with a specific community safety outcome e.g. Duckling Watch at Witton Lakes and the spray art workshops in Cotteridge Park

There are examples of Friends groups working to create safer spaces by working with;

- Schools – providing forest schools, getting children to design anti-litter posters
- Uniformed and non-uniformed youth groups,
- Council officers
- Artists to deter graffiti

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- Rangers and Forest School practitioners - e.g. offering supervised “anti-social” activities e.g. camp fires for teenagers
- Neighbourhood and Street Watch groups to enhance reporting

Sometimes the intervention was the group repeatedly contacting the police; making videos, taking photos, making lots of phone calls, until action took place.

Having highly visible volunteers regularly on-site deters crime and ASB.

One issue that needs to be monitored is the impact that the removal of Park Keepers will have on frequency of crime and ASB.

There is recognition that the disappearance of the youth service has removed an agency that was often a partner in dealing with ASB in parks and open spaces.

60% of the groups who responded felt that their interventions had improved the situation. Only one site thought it had made it worse.

However it would be unfair and inappropriate to expect volunteers to solve the problems of crime and ASB in isolation. We ask a lot of our volunteers and this might be one expectation too far.

“We tried [to make a difference] but it was a waste of my time and effort.”

6. What can be done to make our parks and open spaces safer?

- Park Watch Schemes
- Notices with helpful phone numbers
- More interaction with young people in schools, clubs and parks
- Using Facebook (and other social media) to report incidents
- Encourage more activities – reduce red tape to organise those activities.
- Having more people on site – volunteers, the public and parks staff
- Greater engagement with the community
- Clean, well-maintained parks that are locked at night
- Provision of youth services, outreach workers, joined-up local working and support for volunteers – set up a working group
- Better working with the police
- Partnership approach required
- Enforce by-laws – empower volunteers
- Increased vigilance and reporting
- More police on the beat

“Don’t be afraid, in a non-confrontational way, to comment on unacceptable behaviour”

“Get involved, take control, create a community ethos”



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7. Action Points:

Action Point 1:

Which agency is the best place to report which problems? When do you contact the Parks Service, the police or other agencies?

Action Point 2:

Provide Friends groups with contact details for NPT, fire service and other agencies

Action Point 3:

Provide friends groups and park users with information about when to use 101 or 999

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Appendix: Survey Responses

Which of these issues cause a problem on your site?	Not a problem on our site	A bit of a problem	A problem some of the time	A problem all the time	total number of sites out of 46
Dogs - poo	2.33%	27.91%	20.93%	48.84%	43
Dogs - aggression	38.46%	28.21%	33.33%	0.00%	39
Bicycles - too fast or in the wrong places	31.71%	24.39%	29.27%	17.07%	41
Motorbikes or Mini Motos	22.73%	20.45%	43.18%	15.91%	44
Remote control toys or drones	75.61%	14.63%	9.76%	0.00%	41
Metal Detectorists	84.21%	2.63%	13.16%	0.00%	38
Prostitution	92.11%	2.63%	5.26%	2.63%	38
Drugs - selling	30.77%	20.51%	41.03%	7.69%	39
Drugs - using	18.60%	27.91%	41.86%	11.63%	43
Alcohol	17.50%	30.00%	42.50%	10.00%	40
Abandoned cars	64.86%	21.62%	13.51%	2.70%	37
Graffiti	31.71%	26.83%	29.27%	12.20%	41
Litter	7.14%	11.90%	26.19%	54.76%	42
Damage to plants and trees	25.58%	20.93%	44.19%	9.30%	43
Damage to buildings/play areas/courts/nets	45.00%	22.50%	27.50%	5.00%	40
Gangs or large groups of people	23.81%	28.57%	40.48%	9.52%	42
Inappropriate or bad language	26.83%	36.59%	29.27%	7.32%	41
Violence or intimidation	34.15%	43.90%	17.07%	4.88%	41
Runners - in large groups	82.05%	10.26%	5.13%	2.56%	39
Fires	22.50%	42.50%	35.00%	0.00%	40
Ball games in the wrong places	84.21%	10.53%	5.26%	0.00%	38

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