TAKE A SEAT RESEARCH ANALYSIS

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.
Qualitative community consultation from 15 February – 5 March 2021. A questionnaire with open questions was promoted through various social media, emails to organizations, and posters. People were invited to respond via an online questionnaire, a paper download, or social media comment. All were invited to send in photographs showing something important to them during the Pandemic, a sample are included below. Overall we had around 64 respondents replying confidentially.

BASIS FOR BENCH DESIGN
The requirements of the Leeds Civic Trust is that the bench should reference the CV-19 Pandemic and how the people of Leeds came together and helped each other. From our own experiences and observations we noted the following three ways that people coped during the March to June 2020 period; we used this as the basis for the bench application and design questions asked.

1. Seeking solace from nature
People stopped at the Wells to contemplate, reflect or take a moment away from their homes, work, or exercise, to connect with nature, take a moment in the sunshine, and listen to the water.

2. Shared local experiences and knowledge
People took to walking and exploring the local area during daily exercise: this became a means to ‘commune with’ others, share experiences through photography and learn about the history and ecology of the area by swapping knowledge. There was an increase in people wanting to know the names of wildflowers they would usually admire in passing but not think twice about.

3. Sharing and increasing self sufficiency
Many people enjoyed gardening and growing food for the first time during the pandemic, sharing know-how, seeds and equipment (as garden centres were not open); admiring the tall sunflowers and green beans growing for the first time in a neighbouring garden, being gifted rhubarb to make into a cake to share with others; home baking showed a marked increase. At the Wells people stopped to pick herbs and share recipes over the planters.

We did not ask how people reacted/felt about the health and lockdown situation in spring 2020. It would be impossible in late winter 2021 to get an accurate answer as so much has happened since. However, we can look back at research done at the time¹.

- Increase in clinically significant signs of mental distress; mainly anxiety and depression. Mental health problems result from changes in social conditions, particularly the lack of social contact and loneliness.
- Those who showed greatest ‘distress were, those with young children, 18-34-year-olds, women, people employed before the pandemic especially those worried about facing financial difficulties.
- Nor must we forget the distress that came with the onset of illness, be that CV-19 or other, or the death of loved ones, be that from CV-19 or other.

Research following major disasters typically show that most people are resilient and relatively few develop on-going mental health problems. Over time people adapted to new lifestyles; this is the story of how the people of Guiseley adapted.

FINDINGS.

Question 1. What outdoor activities did you most enjoy during the COVID-19 Pandemic lockdown from March to June 2020?

What is most striking in responses to this question is the sense of purpose associated with the activities enjoyed – a likely way to combat negative mental reactions to lockdown through what could be controlled. A walk was not just exercise, but a long walk, or a walk to explore and discover. Gardening was a chance to grow something different or tidy up and renovate.

‘Sport’ was frequently mentioned, particularly cycling. Some took up new sports eg bowls; some enjoyed sharing sporting activity with children eg running, kite flying, den building and some continued with old habits, bird watching, cricket and football. (Organized sport was banned during the lockdown.)

Companionship was a feature of activity; be it a walk with a dog, a walk with a spouse, or a walk with the family learning about nature. Meeting and taking time to talk with other people was frequently mentioned as a source of pleasure. (Social interaction was strongly regulated during lockdown.)

Different ‘communities’ coming together and connecting was mentioned numerous times. This covered a range from the ordinary to the unusual

- the mundane eg walking,
- the work of community enterprises such as Friends groups, Incredible Edible, or the Ladies who Scrub,
- Community events eg VE Day street parties, a weekly outdoor community sing. It was at such events that those with musical talent could put this to good use – pipers, singers and saxophonists were all mentioned.

The importance of outdoor space from gardens, to local parks, woods and green spaces for activities came through strongly. Nunroyd, Parkinsons, High Royds, Springfield, Sustrans Track, Bradford Golf Course, known and newly discovered woods, the Chevin were all frequently name checked. People said they ‘got to know’ these green spaces more than used to be the case. As one person put it, ‘everything went ‘local’.

“We enjoyed discovering the amazing woods that we had no idea are down the road”
Question 2. What was it about your outdoor activities and the natural environment that you particularly enjoyed?

This focus of the question on experience unsurprisingly led to responses with an emotional element. The most commonly used phrase was ‘fresh-air’ as a way to describe, escape, freedom and peace. It was as if the outdoors had become a giant ‘health farm’ and people just wanted to bathe in it, to counter and heal the negative experiences of the lockdown and pandemic and even life in general.

“We felt we could slow down and enjoy not having too many deadlines to meet.”

Another particularly enjoyable aspect was the peace and quiet as the roads and sky became quiet with a lot less traffic; nature was reclaiming her realm, and everything was relaxed because of it. A great many people mentioned the way senses and nature interacted; you could very noticeably hear the birdsong and listen to the babble of becks. There were also mentions of the smell of flowers and grass, the vividness of colour eg blue of the sky, and the warmth of the sunshine.

“How many natural different shades of green there are and how vibrant the flowers were”

The lockdown gave people time to stop and stare at ‘our own patch’, be it gardens eg flowers, herb gardens and bird feeders, or observations made during local walks. The small and previously unnoticed things of the wayside came under much closer scrutiny, from the wild flowers and fungi (many people got ID apps to help with this) to wild animals eg pheasant, rabbits, and squirrels. The field animals growing eg lambs and cows, and the insects (bees, ladybirds, beetles) nesting, creeping or fluttering. Many mentioned the kaleidoscopic enjoyment of watching nature unfurl, from the changing light of the day, pre-dawn to sunset, to the blossoming of the seasons: so very different to the death and destruction that was the constant refrain of the media; “the pandemic couldn’t stop that”!! People took strength from the continuity of nature; “it carried on as normal ignoring the lockdown”. This was particularly the case for the development of the cygnets in Nunroyd Park; these were mentioned a great deal and one person described them as a “God send”.

“seeing the natural environment coming alive and thriving during the Pandemic gave me an escape and hope for the future.”

Respondents reported not just passively observing, but actively taking pleasure from exploring the local area. The views over the landscape were frequently mentioned; especially from Parkinson’s Park, the Chevin and Hawksworth Lane; it was if a new ‘holiday destination’ had been found.

“I found country footpaths, fields, streets and nooks and crannies I’d never known before”

“Gentle walks around Guiseley with my wife, seeing corners we had not seen for a long time.”
Many realized how much they didn’t know about their own patch, and were keen to share discoveries and experiences with others through a chat on a walk, “more people were interested in home, garden and talking about wildlife” or a photograph on social media – in the same way as we might share ‘holiday snaps’.

Getting up and out at dawn as the days lengthened, or enjoying the sunset over the Aireborough hills during a ‘dusk’ walk, grounded people in the rhythm of life. That so many more people now have a greater knowledge and appreciation of the beauty of their own area can only be beneficial for the future. In a book to go with a 1955 exhibition of Aireborough, it was written “Aireborough folk tiring of the workday world need only lift up their eyes to the hills – countryside and beautiful scenery is just as close as that.”– the truth of that has come out strongly in the research 65 years later. “**Our landscape connects us; it roots us, it helps us take the long view and makes us resilient to the disturbing changes around us**”

“Everything seemed more vivid. How beautiful my local area is.”

“The views over Guiseley Gap & from Otley Chevin are really quite stunning”

Although lockdown had severed normal connections, humans are social animals, **connection with others** is important and many found ways to connect whilst outside. There was time to stop and ‘chat’, conversations with neighbours was more intense, and people got to know one another better; this will hopefully be an enduring legacy. Meanwhile, activity with household members strengthened bonds and pleasure. (No one mentioned it in the research, but as an observation, many young people found quiet, hidden and out of the way places to meet with friends.)

Several people mentioned they had particularly enjoyed community ‘events’ both the local, spontaneous rainbow windows and the Great Bear Hunt and Where’s Larry ‘games’, and the national celebrations of Easter and VE Day. Others talked of regular street quizzes and choirs. Street and public decoration were particularly appreciated

“**People’s creativity aimed at putting smiles on people’s faces**”
Question 3. Did you notice anything in particular in your garden, local landscape or the natural environment during this time?

The following list is roughly ordered by frequency of mentions. Not surprisingly it was the unusual or noteworthy that was picked out in answer to this question. This possibly forms the core of what the bench design might focus on.

a) Less noise pollution enabling the sound of birds to be heard more distinctly (this was number one)
b) Less air pollution enabling better long distance views, and vividness and range of natural colours
c) Gardens, and the fact, for some, they needed more attention, or they had received it with new ventures and planting eg herbs. Or other people’s gardens, sunflowers, a beautiful rose.
d) The variety of wild flowers by the wayside on walks – blankets of blue bells, wild garlic, blossom, buttercups; and the unknown which people tried to identify, stitchwort, celandine, green alkanet, jack by the hedge, honesty, and the unusual spores of mare’s tail.
e) Wildlife, especially the unusual eg barn owls, woodpeckers, orange tipped butterfly, the Nunroyd Cygnets, young lambs and calves, parakeets, red kites, nesting bees
f) Seasons changing
g) The link between the five senses and nature/landscape not previously observed: smell, hearing, sight, (tasting and touching not mentioned so much)
h) Community decorations and displays. VE Day Flags, star on St Oswalds, Stations of the Cross memorial garden, window rainbows.
Question 4. Do you think the local community has come together during the pandemic? If so how have you experienced that?

The majority of people said yes, the local community had come together; one or two said no; and a couple of respondents had mixed views. However, the more negative comments seemed to refer to the change from 2020 to 2021 rather than during the Pandemic period.

Coming together activity ranged from
- simply saying hello to strangers on walks, and warmer acknowledgements
- to neighbours sharing and doing things for one another, making people feel ‘closer’
- more organized volunteer activity from the legion of ‘small community enterprises and charities’ stepping in to make things better eg Friends of Parkinson’s Park, Friend’s of Nunroyd, Incredible Edible, Good Grief Guiseley, Guiseley In Bloom, Codswallop, AVSED, DREAM, Uniformed groups
- Local business going out of their way, also got a mention
- More people supporting local business and going out of their way to do so.

This has left a legacy of greater neighbourliness; people said they now knew much more about their neighbours; when they didn’t even know their names before. Also, of note was a greater coming together of ages on streets that organized community activity, eg weekly clapping or quizzes or VE Day events, has led to sharing and help. There is also a legacy of more help and involvement for local volunteer organizations and charities.

“We have chatted, laughed and cried with our neighbours which we wouldn't have ever done before. We didn't even know most of their names before the pandemic.”

Of particular note as signs of the community coming together and understanding that ‘we are all in this together’ are the following, again a possible focus for design.

- There was more awareness of the loss and grief that so many people were experiencing and the community’s recognition of the need to support loss, exemplified via the lining of streets during funerals – whatever the cause of death.
- People used skills to share and support others eg knitting for Nunroyd, horticultural skills, artistic skills for community decorations. The Scrub Hub, a group of ladies who came together to make PPE for front line workers. One group of neighbours made a ‘fairy house’ for the children.
- Sharing of resources in short supply or unavailable eg compost, plants, bird feed
- Little acts of kindness to brighten people’s lives – making a cake, leaving a chocolate rabbit with an offer of help, singing happy birthday outside a window.

“A neighbour, who I had previously only been aware of as a local dog walker, circulated her details to all the older residents in the road offering help. The card came accompanied by a chocolate rabbit.”

“more awareness of the kindness in the community, more awareness of how we can support each other in the small ways and the small ways become greater as we have become more confident.”

Finally, the most frequently mentioned interaction was ‘in person’; social media was learnt and used as a back-up eg Facebook, Whatsapp, and Zoom.
THIS IS WHAT WE WANT TO CELEBRATE AND REMEMBER
It is important that this legacy of a deeper intimacy with what is ‘local’, and greater community interaction is built on; it is community capital that is extremely valuable, and ‘events’ should not be allowed to drive wedges between people. The bench should be a reminder of the shared experiences of 2020.

A Quirky, Make Do, Street Decoration For VE Day That Made People Smile – Oxford Avenue.

Jennifer A Kirkby
Friends of Springfield Park & Guiseley Wells
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