

**Programming Parks. How do organized events and activities affect the inclusivity of urban green spaces?**

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## Programming parks. How do organized events and activities affect the inclusivity of urban green spaces?

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### ABSTRACT

Programming is one aspect of urban parks provision that has been neglected in existing research, even though it can provide flexible ways of connecting parks with their communities and attract different users. Planned events and activities can also exclude, especially when they aim to generate income to help pay for parks. This paper analyzes park programming by using interviews and observations to analyze a significant case study, Finsbury Park in north London, which hosts a wide range of organized activities and events every year. The research assesses the compatibility of events and activities—with each other and with the aim to produce inclusive public space. We conclude that programming can produce more inclusive parks by making spaces more accessible, flexible, relatable, and sociable. However, over-programming park space should be avoided and we recommend a looser approach that blurs the lines between organized, scheduled events and more informal, spontaneous happenings.

### KEYWORDS

Parks; green space; festivals; events; inclusion

City parks are important amenities that provide places to play, exercise, socialize, and assemble. Parks are also key tools in efforts to slow rates of biodiversity loss and climate change, and they contribute positively to citizens' mental health. These benefits were highlighted during the coronavirus crisis, with Hoover and Lim (2021) dubbing public parks the “shock absorbers” of the pandemic. One of the most significant, yet under-researched, aspects of urban parks provision is programming. This is important because it can encourage the social activity associated with safe, inclusive, convivial, and enjoyable public spaces. In an era of austerity and cuts to public funding, programming is increasingly conflated with park funding—with events and other activities used to earn income. As Reed (2018, p. 46) notes, “lately public spaces themselves have been put to work, through programming, to generate revenue.” For these and other reasons, programming has become a contested aspect of parks provision, with disputes over organized events and activities increasingly common—particularly when these interfere with informal, spontaneous uses.

We adopt a broad definition of programming here, encompassing planned events and organized activities. This is deliberate as we are interested in how various events and

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activities affect each other, as well as their effects on incidental park use. According to Glover (2015), “programming deserves, though fails, to receive the same attention as the design and construction of public space” (p. 99). Published research tends to focus on confined, redesigned, spaces, such as new city squares, whereas our paper addresses the compatibility and the effects of programming in large, established, parks. Our work focuses on inclusivity, as one key aim of programming is to ensure a diverse range of users benefits from parks. Inclusivity means ensuring that a wide variety of people, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged groups, can use public parks and feel welcome and comfortable when they do. This issue is particularly pertinent at present, given the injustices in park provision highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 crisis (Hoover & Lim, 2021). Ultimately, the research addresses a key question: how compatible are the various elements of park programming with each other and with the aim to produce inclusive public space? This question is addressed by examining a significant case study, Finsbury Park, a large municipal park in north London notable for the super-diverse and densely populated neighborhoods that surround it (Stansfield, 2018). Super-diversity indicates a wide variety of ethnicities, and people born in different parts of the world, but also acknowledges that these characteristics intersect with other variables including legal status and access to employment (Vertovec, 2007). Following a review of key ideas, the case study and the qualitative methods used to research it are introduced. Subsequently, the paper discusses how organized activities and events affect levels of inclusion, and the compatibility of programmed activities. The concluding section integrates research findings with ideas from the literature review to produce a conceptualization that explains how programming affects the inclusivity of urban parks.

## Literature review

Programming is now an integral part of parks management: it is seen as an inexpensive and effective way of transforming parks, allowing them to be adapted to the needs of communities (Glover, 2015). Programmed events and activities tend to be staged for several reasons: to increase the number of users; to diversify user profiles; to enhance park experiences (including perceptions of safety); to promote affiliation and engagement; and to encourage users to interact. Hosting events and activities can also change the ways a park is perceived, thus encouraging future visits. Basic programming aims to ensure that urban parks are enjoyed by the public, but a strategic approach aligns parks with wider policy objectives.

### *Interaction and representation: The benefits of programming*

Events and organized activities can diversify park users and encourage social interactions between people from different backgrounds. These interactions are known to be very significant: Allport's (1954) hypothesis that positive contact between different groups leads to greater tolerance has now evolved into a widely accepted theory. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) analyzed over 500 studies across 38 nations, 94% of which found that increased contact led to lower levels of prejudice. In terms of inter-group contact in *parks*, Peters' (2010) research suggests this tends to be minimal, but is more

likely when visitors were active or attending events—a finding reinforced by other authors (Powers et al., 2022). In Neal et al.'s (2015) study, organized events were identified by park users as moments when people felt connected to culturally different others. Barker et al. (2019) found that thicker forms of engagement, such as conversations with other people, were more likely when park users were engaged in shared activities. Fincher et al. (2014) suggest these effects are more likely to occur if events are loosely organized and staged in peripheral locations. This supports Franck and Stevens' (2007) argument that measures intended to impose order can reduce the diversity of uses and users, in contrast to "loose spaces" which "allow for the chance encounter, the spontaneous event, the enjoyment of diversity and the discovery of the unexpected" (p. 4).

Cultural events and organized activities that celebrate minority cultures produce material and symbolic representations of marginalized groups in park settings which makes people from these groups feel more welcome in, and more attached to, parks. If people are not represented in parks they will not use them (Low, 2013), so programming can allow marginalized or less visible communities to "self-identify" (Glover, 2015). Representation can be achieved through physical features (monuments, interpretation) and symbolic gestures (names of spaces), but also through events and activities (Low, 2013). Existing research tends to focus on the ways events and activities are experienced, but the planning and organization of park programming are important too. As Hoover and Lim (2021) emphasized, creating parks that serve disadvantaged people requires them to be planned with these communities. Participatory design approaches should include co-produced programming (Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2019), as staging dedicated activities on behalf of marginalized groups may be patronizing and tokenistic if they are not involved in organizing them.

### ***Curation as control: Problems with programming***

Grodach (2010) reminded us that "diverse programming does not necessarily guarantee broad representation or that different groups will interact" (p. 487) reflecting wider skepticism. Minority groups appreciate opportunities to socialize in park settings, including at festivals, but interactions tend to remain *within* groups, not *between* them (Gobster, 2002). Even if inter-group encounters do happen, these may not lead to any meaningful changes in attitudes or in behaviors toward others (Valentine, 2008). There is also a danger that temporary programming becomes a cheap alternative to implementing inclusive park design. Klinenberg (2018) provided a useful illustration: "parks, for instance, may occasionally host programming for older people, but they are rarely designed to meet the needs of an aging population" (p. 134).

Even when focused on inclusion, programming can exclude as some users are deterred by symbolic, financial, and physical barriers associated with organized events and activities. These may exacerbate existing barriers, for example: intrapersonal constraints (lack of perceived belonging); interpersonal constraints (e.g. limited social networks); or structural constraints (e.g. time and money). Events and activities can provide defensive measures deliberately designed to exclude certain groups by privileging others (Glover, 2020). In other words, they are a convenient way to deter "undesirables" (Madden, 2010). Programming is a form of control, and some authors

see intensive programming as the antithesis of accessible, open space (Mitchell, 2017). Enclosed city parks are already “designed for control” (Hebbert, 2008, p. 40) so in these contexts programming provides an additional way of controlling space. The problem of over-programming is also a problem in some cities, e.g. London, where hiring out park space to event organizers is increasingly resisted (Smith, 2021). Clark (2018) links these disputes to the ways parks have been blighted by “the modern disease of constant, organized fun,” adding that “not every form of leisure requires a lanyard and a burrito.” This highlights a further criticism: programmed activities are sometimes dismissed as mere abstractions of space, rather than lived space—as highlighted by Glover’s (2020) suggestion that programming aims to “stage” urban life.

## Research methods

The research on park programming presented here involved a detailed analysis of Finsbury Park in north London. This case was selected because it is a large park (46 hectares) located in a super-diverse part of a global city—four miles north of London’s city center at the intersection of the Boroughs of Islington, Hackney, and Haringey. Finsbury Park was also chosen because of the contested ways it is used for large-scale events. This park offers a wide range of activities and events, and is surrounded by very diverse communities, both in terms of ethnicity, but also levels of affluence. Over one-third of local residents are from black or ethnic minority groups (Haringey, 2020); and the local authority that controls Finsbury Park has the highest levels of income inequality in England (Scott, 2016). These characteristics provide an ideal context in which to adjudge how programming affects inclusivity.

The case was researched through a series of qualitative research exercises conducted 2019–2020, including regular observations at times when organized events/activities were and weren’t happening. Twenty-six formal observations, systematically scheduled on different days/times, were undertaken by one of the authors over a six month period from August 2019 to March 2020. A yearlong study was planned, but fieldwork was curtailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the observation data analyzed here relates to the pre-pandemic period. Observations were supplemented by other visits by the other two authors at times when significant events and activities were being staged. Multiple in-depth interviews were also conducted online with representatives of various organizations that stage events and activities in Finsbury Park. Our detailed observations in the park helped us to help identify the most significant events and activities; and so we interviewed people from:

- 2NQ: a not-for-profit organization that develops arts, cultural, and heritage programmes with local communities.
- Edible Landscapes: a not-for-profit community education project specializing in forest gardening.
- Furtherfield: an arts organization specializing in technological art that runs a gallery in the middle of Finsbury Park.
- Latino Life: a media and culture company that organizes London’s largest free Latin music festival.

- London Heathside: an athletics club that operates out of multiple sites in North London, including the track located in Finsbury Park.
- Finsbury Park parkrun: a free to enter 5 km run that attracts ~600 runners every Saturday morning.
- Pedal Power: a cycling club for teenagers and adults with learning disabilities that uses two sites within Finsbury Park.

We also interviewed other key stakeholders, including an elected representative from Haringey Council—the local authority responsible for managing and maintaining Finsbury Park. Interviewees included the current and previous chairs of The Friends of Finsbury Park—a volunteer group that represents local residents. The Friends of Finsbury Park have long campaigned against major events, particularly commercial music festivals, so we were particularly interested in their perspective. We also interviewed park users, some of whom we met on walks organized by 2NQ. Recruiting participants in this purposive way meant we could speak to potential interviewees beforehand and identify people with varying views on the current events policy: supportive, ambivalent, and hostile. The organizers of major music festivals did not respond to requests for interviews, so we interviewed experts in Black British music and London's grime scene to get a broader perspective on the controversial Wireless festival that has been staged in Finsbury Park since 2014. The local Member of Parliament answered a series of questions by email; and we also interviewed an arts programmer that had worked with several of the organizations listed above and a PhD student researching Finsbury Park to corroborate our observations. In total 20 formal interviews were conducted with nine event organizers/activity providers; four park users; two co-chairs of the Friends of Finsbury Park; two former chairs of the Friends of Finsbury Park, two experts in Black British music; and one elected representative of Haringey Council. Interviews were semi-structured, led by a topic guide, and lasted between 30 and 90 min. Questions varied according to who was involved, but the topic guide covered: participants' relationship with and attitudes toward Finsbury Park; views on park management and funding; and perspectives on events staged. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed and synthesized with observation data. To provide consistency, thematic qualitative data analysis was conducted by one member of the research team, with other members providing feedback on the categories and codes identified. Transcripts were read multiple times and a set of relevant codes were identified that were then grouped together into related themes. The findings presented below are primarily drawn from the formal interviews, but we have also integrated comments from informal conversations with park users during observations.

### **Programming Finsbury Park: Research findings**

Finsbury Park is "... a space of multiplicity" (Stansfield, 2018) encompassing parklands linked by tree lined carriageways, but also spaces, buildings, and enclosures set aside for dedicated activities. These are formally allocated to tenants: two cafes; a boating lake; and sites occupied by Furtherfield (an art gallery and offices), Finsbury Park Sport Partnership (the athletics track and tennis courts), and Edible Landscapes



(a horticultural site on the eastern fringes). There are dedicated sites for basketball, volleyball, baseball, and skateboarding, and organized activities are also staged regularly in the rest of the park, including fitness classes and a weekly parkrun. Sports activities are viewed positively, even by non-participants: “I really like walking past and seeing ... there’s always sports people playing footie or cricket or tag rugby ... so yeah I enjoy that.” (conversation with park user) Reflecting Clayton’s (2009) findings, active spaces facilitated interactions between diverse social groups that wouldn’t otherwise talk to one another. The start and end of parkrun and the volleyball and basketball courts were good examples of times/spaces where these interactions occurred.

There is generally a lot going on in Finsbury Park, especially in terms of sports and exercise activities; and this contributes to the wide range of people that visit. The Haringey Councilor we interviewed suggested that it was important to have “as many diverse activities in the park as possible,” with safety cited as the main justification: “it needs things going on everywhere because the more people, the safer it is.” This attitude reflects conventional wisdom about the value of social surveillance and is justified by research which suggests that events, family spaces, cafes, and art installations are important ways to make urban parks safer (Zavadskas et al., 2019). However, there is a complex relationship between measures to improve safety and efforts to enhance inclusivity. When we asked a local Member of Parliament how Finsbury Park could be made more welcoming for people from different groups, they stressed the importance of making it “feel safe” but qualified this by adding, “in the warmer months for instance, there have been issues with rough sleepers.” This highlights the dilemma of reconciling inclusivity and security, as prioritizing the latter means excluding groups deemed a threat. Whilst some see the homeless people in Finsbury Park as a problem, their continued, visible presence suggests the park is more inclusive, and *looser* than many other public spaces.

### ***Programmed activities in Finsbury Park***

One of the recurring themes in our interviews was the way organized activities bring more people into Finsbury Park, including people who might not otherwise come. We witnessed programming that privileges protected characteristics (disability, gender, ethnicity, age, faith, sexuality), and recognizes intersectionality—the interconnected nature of social categorizations which reinforces disadvantage (Powers et al., 2020). Pedal Power is perhaps the best example with cycling events provided not just for disabled groups, but for people from disadvantaged disabled groups. Their open sessions reflect local demographics and the organizer expressed pride about the diversity of their participants. Provision for people with disabilities is also a feature of parkrun which caters for visually impaired runners (they can organize a guide runner) and people in wheelchairs (the route is mainly on carriageways). Elderly users are one of the few groups not well served in the park, and our eldest interviewee (aged 79) suggested a walking group to address this.

A lot of park activities are populated by middle-class, white people, contrasting with the super-diversity in surrounding neighborhoods. For example, the official from parkrun acknowledged that “in general we are pretty white, pretty middle-class.”



Our interviewees told us that offering *free* activities widened participation, but even these tended to be dominated by white, middle-class people. This suggests the obstacles restricting wider participation are not merely financial—the location, timing, meanings, and atmospheres of certain activities can also deter participation from marginalized groups, such as those from ethnic minority and migrant communities. Other providers acknowledged they needed to do more to engage less experienced individuals from disadvantaged groups. For example, the parkrun representative said they mainly attract “people who are already running” and Edible Landscapes suggested they would like to bring in more people “who are completely new to gardening.” However, some interviewees felt their events and activities did represent the diverse communities that live around Finsbury Park. A representative from Furtherfield highlighted that operating an arts venue in a park meant they could reach different audiences: “nearly 50% of visitors to our exhibitions are people who don’t normally go to art galleries.”

Programming usually refers to organized and planned activities, but our interviewees suggested serendipitous and spontaneous park experiences can be nurtured too. For activity providers this was achieved by moving away from their bases, which are often enclosed by fences, and taking their activities into the rest of the park. Several interviewees mentioned that relocating their activities into popular spaces gave them greater visibility, allowing people to stumble across them. Edible Landscapes takes activities out of their peripheral site into the most popular parts of the park to engage different groups. This is also important to Furtherfield which considers the wider park to be “one of our venues.” Pedal Power do this too, not to generate wider participation, but to change attitudes: “the local community sees the disabled people having a great old time and the chat is not about disability, the talk is all about, ooh that’s a wonderful bike.”

### ***Festivals and events in Finsbury Park***

Alongside programmed activities, a range of events are staged in Finsbury Park’s open spaces. In 2019, the park hosted four weekends of major music events (Table 1), including Wireless—the UK’s largest urban music festival. These events generated over £1,000,000 for Haringey Council—enough to fund the annual maintenance budget for the park and various improvements. Smaller festivals were also staged in 2019 (Table 1), including some dedicated to marginalized communities, such as a Homeless Festival (StreetsFest), celebrations to mark Kurdish New Year (Newroz), a music event aimed at

**Table 1.** A summary of significant events staged in Finsbury Park in 2019.

| Jan       | Feb   | Mar                                   | Apr                    | May         | June       |
|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------|------------|
|           |   | Newroz                                | Funfair<br>ToughMudder | Steel Yard* | Community* |
| July      | Aug   | Sep                                   | Oct                    | Nov         | Dec        |
| Wireless* | Sink the Pink<br>Peggy Gou DJ<br>ToughMudder<br>La Clave Fest | Abode*<br>Hospitality*<br>StreetsFest | Zippos Circus          |             |            |

Paid entry events are written in bold text, with those classed as major events (10,000–50,000 attendees) marked with an asterisk \*.

LGBTQ audiences (Sink the Pink), and a festival celebrating Latin American music and culture (La Clave Fest).

Perhaps the most obvious example of inclusive programming was one of the festivals mentioned above. In August, Finsbury Park hosted La Clave Fest, a free festival celebrating UK Latin American culture(s). As a “new” migrant community, London’s Latin American population is sometimes neglected in discussions about equality, diversity, and inclusion (Berg, 2019) and the Mayor of London recently acknowledged the need for events that reach out to Latin Americans (Mayor of London, 2018). La Clave Fest moved to Finsbury Park in 2019, and its new home was significant given the ongoing campaign to save a nearby Latin cultural hub. This festival also reflects the regular presence of people from Latin communities within Finsbury Park, particularly in areas dedicated to volleyball and baseball. In this sense, La Clave Fest helped to increase the visibility of everyday users of the park in the manner highlighted by Citroni and Karrholm (2019). The festival was highly appreciated by several interviewees, as it showed that the park could still hold free music festivals that weren’t secured with perimeter fencing:

I still honestly haven’t heard anybody who had a negative opinion, mainly because it had no gates. It wasn’t lasting for days. It was just like half a day. So, for me, that still seems to be one way, the most promising way, of having festivals. (Arts Programmer)

It was great, wasn’t it? And it was completely open, anybody can walk through it, you can take part in it or [do] whatever you want to do. And that is a great thing to do in a park. (2NQ)

The organizer of La Clave Fest explained how this event was staged in an inclusive way: content was less prescribed with people invited to come along and “do their thing.” This looser approach produced a more eclectic festival and more diverse mix of people. La Clave Fest attracted members of London’s Latin communities but also other groups who had heard about the event through outreach activities and those that came across the event whilst in the park. As a result, La Clave Fest provided a platform enabling interactions between people from different social groups.

There are strong links between La Clave Fest and the festivals advocated by Wynn (2015) who suggested the dynamics of occasions are determined by porosity (openness), density (physical co-presence), and turbulence (propensity for unofficial activity). La Clave Fest demonstrated each of these characteristics, which perhaps explained both its popularity and its potential to generate positive social impacts. This festival nurtured the sorts of exchanges that lead to greater awareness of difference, but also higher levels of trust and empathy. It also adhered to Fincher et al.’s (2014) recommendation that we “embrace the notion that not all festival activities can be pre-determined by their organizers” (p. 44). Unlike many themed festival spaces, La Clave Fest was not characterized by esthetic or behavioral controls, and this flexibility, and scope for unplanned uses, meant the festival produced loose spaces (Franck & Stevens, 2007).

In general, interviewees felt that a good range of events were staged in Finsbury Park, catering for a wide range of audiences. However, there was also recognition that the park staged more accessible, radical, and progressive events in the past. This was

reflected in one park user's account of StreetsFest, an event staged in September 2019 for the benefit of rough sleepers and impoverished local people:

It was a midweek little festival, very strange little thing. Everybody was welcome. There was quite a lot of people having things like pedicures and having their haircut. I was thinking that is the last remnant of what Finsbury Park used to be like when I first started going to the park. There used to be little festivals and things. And that's changed now. It's very corporate.

This event provided a welcoming and enjoyable experience for vulnerable people, and it generated awareness of homelessness and reflected the reality of a park which is used by insecurely housed people during the day and night. Similarly, there was appreciation of other day long events like Sink the Pink, a music festival that celebrated LGBTQ communities: "There were lots of different people there, although it was predominantly for gay people. It was a really mixed bag of people. And it felt like a community event" (Interview with park user). This positivity was again accompanied by a nagging sense that Finsbury Park used to stage more progressive festivals which had been "squeezed out" by events that generate commercial revenue for Haringey Council. For example, one of the co-chairs of the Friends of Finsbury Park told us:

Yesterday, I saw Haringey [Council] tweeted about how Finsbury Park had hosted Pride back in 2004. And I think many residents would whole-heartedly support that ... a progressive use of a public space to raise awareness or as a platform for consciousness. There's a good history of that. I'm not sure that many people see that hiring it out to Live Nation for 70 days of the year has the same equivalence.

### *The Wireless festival*

The most obvious example of the new commercial orientation is Wireless, a large-scale music festival owned by Live Nation. Although this festival is seen by critics as the archetypal example of an exclusive event, others claim it engages communities that tend to be excluded. The event is a showcase for grime music—which originated in London—linking the park to local black and youth cultures. Wireless attracts a racially diverse crowd to Finsbury Park, particularly since the event was (re)positioned as a celebration of Black British music in 2017. According to the expert in Black British music we interviewed: "for the first time we saw a large Asian presence at the festival; a community that's always supported black British music but has just been written out."

Wireless divides opinion and many of our interviewees felt that the heavy security and ticket prices compromised the ethos of a people's park accessible to all. It seems hard to consider Wireless and the other ticketed music festivals as examples of inclusive programming—even if they do add to the range of events that Finsbury Park offers. The Black British Music expert insisted the Wireless festival was inclusive: "It's not private, it's not exclusive, it's quite the opposite; it's inclusive" and, whilst concerns about the price of tickets were expressed, these were not shared by all. One park user we interviewed suggested Wireless represents a more accessible version of contemporary music festivals: "These are kids who can't afford to go to Glastonbury but Finsbury Park is providing them with a Wireless Festival or similar where they're having a really, really good time and I think that's a positive." By staging Wireless and other music festivals, excluded groups, such as young, black females may feel more welcome in this

park. However, other interviewees were keen to highlight more problematic connections between Wireless and Finsbury Park: they feel that the festival reinforces problems with drugs, alcohol, crime, litter, and vandalism.

### ***Compatibility and co-operation***

So far events and activities have been examined separately, but it is also important to consider how different elements of park programming work together. Compatibility is examined in two ways: first, in terms of actual, and potential for, cooperation and collaboration between activities; and, second, with regards to the (in)compatibility of some events and activities that compete with each other for time and space.

Some of the activity providers we interviewed co-operate regularly to assist each other's work. These collaborations were often logical and expected—for example, the ways London Heathside work with parkrun organizers by sharing equipment and personnel. Other examples of cooperation were more imaginative. Edible Landscapes told us about plans to work with Finsbury Park Sports Partnership and Pedal Power within the athletics facility: “the track has got quite a lot of grassland around the edge of it, some of which is very rarely used and just gets mowed.” Furtherfield is planning a collaboration with Pedal Power involving interactive sculptures and has also worked with Wireless to display artwork on the festival's big screens. This was an opportunity they appreciated: “This is a diverse crowd, so it's great for an arts organization, even if half the crowd weren't watching.” Furtherfield thinks there could be more collaboration: “Our attitude is that if we have to close down because of the festival, Wireless should make sure we are able to do something as part of their event—this would allow us to capture their audience.”

Although activity providers have collaborated with other activity providers, there are fewer collaborations involving event organizers as their temporary presence makes it harder to develop relationships. The most important links between large-scale events staged in Finsbury Park and regular activities are financial ones. Environmental Impact Fees that organizers are charged mean these events are important sources of funding for many activity providers. In 2018/9, £50,000 was allocated from these funds to several providers in the park, including Pedal Power, Edible Landscapes, and Furtherfield—all awarded ~£10,000 each. Several providers highlighted an associated dilemma: they were concerned about the commercial mindset that was now driving park programming and the impacts of major music festivals on their activities but had become reliant on the grant funding generated by these events.

### ***Large-scale events***

The scale of some of the programming in Finsbury Park also causes issues as annual, large-scale music festivals impinge upon year round, smaller scale programming in the park. For example, during Wireless, Furtherfield's gallery and offices are rendered inaccessible, parkrun is canceled, and Pedal Power sessions have to be moved or postponed. When park stakeholders were asked by Haringey Council to name their key priorities the organizers of Tag Rugby responded: “The main issue that we have is the events that take place during the summer that mean that we need to relocate to other

venues” (quoted in Haringey, 2020, p. 93). Effects are exacerbated as major events take 2 weeks to set up and 1 week to take down, lengthening interruptions to regular programming. Disruption is extended for some providers, such as the Tag Rugby organizers, “because of the state of the pitches after events” (quoted in Haringey, 2020, p. 93). Canceling or rescheduling programmed activities also has a knock-on effect in that it disrupts their regularity. As the organizer of Pedal Power told us: “it confuses everybody and then a few people lose the rhythm of coming along to the sessions. You change one Saturday and everybody forgets what they’re supposed to be doing.” This clash of weekly activities with annual events is underpinned by the inevitable difficulty of synco-pating “weekly rhythms” and “seasonal rhythms” when programming public spaces (Glover, 2020).

Even if large-scale events do not physically prevent other activities from happening (e.g. in the site dedicated to athletics), the noise associated with large-scale events causes problems: “you’re trying to start a race and all you can hear is massive guitar noise going on in the background” (Interview with Heathside). Noise pollution in parks is a significant issue (Moshakis, 2022), but attitudes to festival noise in Finsbury Park vary. A good illustration of polarized positions was the contrast between one park user who said: “if you really want it to be dead quiet then maybe...live somewhere else” and another we interviewed: “When I moved here. I didn’t expect to live in complete silence, I had realistic expectations. However, the chaos that comes about when we have concerts is unbelievable.” We talked to park users whilst festivals were happening to assess how everyday use was affected and there was consensus that the park was still usable for a range of activities, even if it was a bit noisy:

I can understand the noise issues...but even sitting here now I don’t really mind the music...there’s loads of space...like now even though there are loads of people around and that festival going on there’s still a lot of space for everyone...and you can still even get...kind of privacy...like now we found this place...and it’s like...well, I don’t want to say it’s quiet...but we’re not disturbed by the festival or anyone really. (Conversation with park user)

### ***Co-ordination and consultation***

Researchers have identified the importance of managing events collectively, as portfolios, rather than treating them separately, including work on how large events can support and complement smaller events and activities (Richards, 2015). Unfortunately, events in Finsbury Park seem to be managed in a more ad hoc and disjointed manner. This is partly due to the number of organizations involved and partly due to the conflicting aims of programming. Rather than developing an integrated and complementary calendar, large-scale events are separated from the regular activities and smaller events. For example, the representative from Futherfield told us that they feel “divorced” from the events programme, a view shared by some of the other activity providers we interviewed. The lack of a co-ordinated, co-produced programme has led to conflicts between Haringey Council and local residents, but also between event organizers and activity providers.

Large-scale festivals were regarded as disruptive, not just because of their material restrictions, but because regular rows over these events dissuaded several activity

providers from attending park stakeholder meetings. The impact of large-scale events is compounded by poor communications which means activity providers sometimes don't know about them until event infrastructures materialize. Although Haringey Council organize various consultation exercises and convene regular stakeholder meetings, some providers engage more than others, and there remain doubts about whether those involved in regular, informal activities are consulted. The Friends of Finsbury Park have long campaigned against the way the park is used for major events. One of the former chairs told us:

One of my complaints was that Haringey had never engaged with a lot of the communities using the park. A lot of Latin Americans who come from very poor communities were using the baseball and volleyball courts, and I went to speak to them on behalf of the Friends. I'd say, 'has Haringey come to speak to you about these events and the impact they might have on you using the park?' None of them had been spoken to.

Interviewees suggested the emphasis on income generation was driving park programming and this not only disrupted existing activity, it meant some events were missing from the park. A representative from Futherfield told us: "despite the large number of events happening in the park; and despite our knowledge and networks and reputation we have never been approached to curate a visual arts festival in the park." By prioritizing commercially lucrative festivals, the park now lacks the free music festivals that had been appreciated in the past. Rather than seeing festivals as ways of generating revenue, the arts programmer we interviewed suggested they should be recipients of funding: "There should be more civic public investment in festivals as something that brings value and activates the park for the diverse people who live around the park." This would shift the emphasis away from money making spectacles toward "genuinely open festivals with radical potential" (Fincher et al., 2014).

### *Effects on unprogrammed activities*

Large-scale festivals affect the capacity of the park to host smaller events and programmed activities, but they also affect the potential of Finsbury Park to host unofficial activities. Informal "pickup" team sports engage younger, more diverse park users and help them connect with others (Clayton, 2009) and in Finsbury Park, basketball and football are important pickup sports that are disrupted by major events. We observed other informal activities too, including slacklining, dance lessons, fitness classes, political assemblies, parties, and barbecues, which encouraged social interactions. Barbecues are not permitted in Finsbury Park—but they still happen—and our observations and conversations in the park suggests they too encourage encounters between strangers:

The first time I came to this park I was going to the shop, I hadn't lived here very long...and I saw a fire being lit behind the community gardens there...and I was like there's a fire...people setting fires in London, like what the hell! And so I came in and I was really brave...and went over to say hello. There were lots of ... men aged 50, 60, 40 maybe who go there and have barbeques like a lot...and it was like a fire in a fire pit...and they were friendly...and I thought this is really nice actually. (Conversation with park user).

The influx of large numbers of people and the associated noise, behaviors, and disruptive construction process meant that homeless people living in the park were affected

by large-scale festivals. However, festivals didn't push these people out. Tents tend to be erected in secluded, northerly, parts of the park that aren't used for the largest festivals, and when events were staged in close proximity to these tents (e.g. Sink the Pink), local authorities and event organizers seemed willing to tolerate their presence.

The spaces occupied by large festivals, and the associated security and disruption, mean they do displace informal, unlicensed, and illegal activities. Physical displacement is perhaps less of an issue, as these activities tend to occur in the north of the park which is less open and visible. Nevertheless, the formalization and commercialization of park activities does squeeze out informal activities, restricting the park's looseness.

## Discussion

Finsbury Park is used by a very diverse range of people, and these users reflect the super-diversity of surrounding communities. But the extent to which programming has contributed to this diversity is a complex issue to unravel. There are some great examples of progressive projects which have engaged people who wouldn't otherwise have come to the park. However, there is also evidence that programming facilitates "diversity" by ensuring that white, middle-class people also use the park on a regular basis. This may be more beneficial than it sounds. Without events and activities that cater to privileged audiences, those that benefit marginalized groups may be rendered unviable—for financial reasons, but also political ones. Finsbury Park has an edgy reputation (Stansfield, 2018) and it is important that it is used by, and supported by, a range of different groups. In this context, programming could be interpreted as part of efforts to gentrify the park for the benefit of privileged residents that have moved to this area recently. This is an obvious criticism, but the efforts of activity providers to widen participation should be acknowledged. Minority groups are often encouraged to integrate and participate more, but to increase meaningful contact between diverse groups, white and middle-class users also need to interact with other groups, rather than confining themselves to activities and sites where they feel most comfortable.

The research discussed here has highlighted the ways programming can enhance parks and attract users, but it has also reaffirmed the dangers of over-programming. Several interviewees complained about the size of some music festivals, but there were also issues regarding the regularity of these events and interruptions to everyday use. The Friends of Finsbury Park estimated that including set up and take down days, during the first 8 months of 2018 the park was occupied by festivals for 113 days (Clark, 2018). Alongside programmed uses, lots of informal group activities happen in the park—including pickup sports, dance classes, political assemblies, and slacklining. These are significant "events" too in that they encourage strangers to interact, and it is important that organized activities don't crowd out less formal ones. More research is needed, including work outside Finsbury Park, to clarify what type of displacement occurs when large-scale festivals are staged. Following Hall and Shelby's (2000) work on temporal and spatial displacement, it is important to establish whether people alter the location, timing, or focus of their activities, whether they go to a different park, and whether some users have permanently relocated.



Our research pointed toward the benefits of organizing activities that invite serendipitous and spontaneous engagement, rather than just providing pre-planned activities for pre-booked participants. Blurring the lines between organized events and everyday park use is beneficial. This can be achieved at various scales; from staging large-scale, but fence free, festivals that attract incidental engagement, to bringing activities out of dedicated sites into busier park areas. In Finsbury Park there is understandable concern about festival fences, but other activities are also fenced off, and it is important that providers transcend these boundaries to widen participation.

In considering the compatibility of programming our research highlights that, whilst there is potential for events and activities to support one another, at present there is a lack of co-ordination. There is incompatibility both in terms of the objectives of programming and the material ways that some activities preclude or crowd out others. The most obvious example is Finsbury Park's use as a venue for large-scale events. Whilst there is disagreement about how inclusive these events are, they do affect other activities in the park. Ticketed music festivals subsidize regular activities, but this positive contribution is negated by other effects, including displacing other events. An event policy that is driven by income generation targets means that progressive, free festivals are not prioritized. There is potential to stage more arts events, and sports events, and to involve regular park users and activity providers in large-scale events. As Citroni and Karrholm (2019) suggest, park events serve to raise the visibility of everyday park activities and Finsbury Park's event programme should include, represent and celebrate groups that regularly use the park.

## Conclusions: Conceptualizing the inclusive park

Much of the literature on programming, animating, activating, or curating public space is based on analyses of relatively confined spaces, such as redesigned city squares. Focusing on a larger, long established, green space has highlighted a series of issues regarding the compatibility and effects of organized events and activities. Two stand out. First, the very notion of having a coherent or strategic programme is complicated by the variety of stakeholders involved in contemporary parks management and the wide range of activities hosted. Second, some events and activities are difficult to combine, a problem which is exacerbated by a lack of coordination and integration, but also by contrasting objectives. Large-scale events generate income but interfere with the everyday use of the park and other events and activities. This disruption is both direct; by occupying, enclosing, and damaging park spaces, but also indirect; by disrupting the rhythm of regular activities and by normalizing the temporary privatization of parkland. Commercial events support other park activities by providing some additional funding, but there is scope to integrate and leverage these events more effectively and more imaginatively.

The conclusion that programming to satisfy demands for self-financed parks fosters exclusion and injustice is one that various other researchers have also reached. What is different about our paper is that, by focusing on programming more generally, the research highlights the ways that festivities and activities *can* foster inclusion. Festivals, such as La Clave Fest (rebranded in 2021 as Latino Life in the Park) show that

organized gatherings can achieve positive effects by highlighting diversity, by encouraging different groups to visit, and by fostering interactions between them. Programming can make parks more inclusive by allowing recreational spaces to be flexibly tailored to the diversity of local communities. In the case analyzed here, a range of activities ensure the park welcomes people of different ethnicities, religions, sexualities, and (dis)abilities, as well as other vulnerable people. Some programming acknowledged intersectionality, but—in line with the findings and recommendations of other research (Powers et al., 2020)—more provision for those with multiple disadvantaged statuses is necessary. One of the additional benefits of organizing these activities in a public park is that marginalized groups—and the issues they face—are made more visible.

The findings from our study can be integrated with key ideas from the literature to produce a conceptual framework that advances the understanding of how programming affects the inclusivity of parks. The framework is grounded in Franck and Stevens' (2007) notion of loose space and the related ideas that parks need to be accessible and flexible to be inclusive. It also draws on the widely accepted theory that positive contact between different groups promotes greater awareness and acceptance of differences (Allport, 1954) and acknowledges that users need to be able to identify with park environments (Low, 2013). Put simply, inclusive park space is that which is: accessible; flexible; sociable; and relatable. These characteristics maximize the chances that a diverse range of people will feel welcome and comfortable in park settings.

This framework is particularly relevant to understanding the effects of programming; as activities and events affect levels of relatability, sociability, accessibility, and flexibility. Events can make parks more *relatable* by ensuring people from marginalized groups, such as teenagers (particularly teenage girls), elderly citizens, members of LGBTQI+ and ethnic minority communities feel represented in and by them (Low, 2013). Events ensure parks attract a more diverse range of people and allow marginalized groups to build an affinity to parks. Programming is also a very good way of making spaces *sociable*, as events and activities bring different people into parks and facilitate inter-group interactions (Powers et al., 2022). If organized activities are taken into communal parks spaces, rather than confined to defined areas, then it can facilitate incidental sociability rather than merely connecting people who had come for a specific activity or event. Programmed activities can also make parks more *accessible* by encouraging people into the park who wouldn't otherwise be there—this is achieved by lowering perceived barriers (including perceptions of safety) and by providing a variety of attractive things for people to do. However, some events—most notably fenced off music festivals—reduce accessibility by limiting access and displacing free activities. In these instances, accessibility is reduced by imposing physical or financial barriers. As our Finsbury Park research has shown, programming parks with large-scale, fenced events restricts the *accessibility* of park spaces but also their *flexibility*. Drawing on Franck and Stevens' (2007) ideas about loose spaces, there is a need to think about looser programming that doesn't overly determine uses/users of park spaces. Programming is renowned for helping parks spaces to be flexibly customized to users, but repeatedly staging very controlled events actually renders park spaces less flexible.

Music festivals link Finsbury Park to black and youth cultures, addressing Low's (2013) recommendation that marginalized cultures need to be visibly represented in

park spaces. But making parks more relatable by staging expensive music festivals paradoxically furthers exclusion. In these instances, as Modan (2008) argues, racial diversity is celebrated as a commodified experience, rather than something linked to equity, justice, and rights. In the past (2006–2008), Finsbury Park hosted *rise*, an anti-racism festival, but public authorities now rely on an expensive music festival to highlight the park's diversity credentials. We need to be wary of the potential for moral panics and prejudice against black and youth cultures when assessing resistance to urban music festivals. But local opposition to these is based on more than complaints about noise and antisocial behavior (which can be underpinned by prejudice), it is driven by worries about the (in)accessibility of public space.

### ***Progressive programming: Some recommendations***

Programming in Finsbury Park's large open spaces oscillates between fenced enclosures in the summer months and low levels of use at other times. Neither manifestation is particularly flexible as even "too much openness limits activities to those that can be performed in a void" (Franck & Stevens, 2007, p. 10). Our paper demonstrates the value of a more progressive approach involving free and unfenced festivals, with parklands remaining accessible but punctuated by temporary stages, stalls, and seating areas. Just as commentators now advocate loose spaces or "vague parks" (Kamvasinou, 2006), we also need to think about looser programming that can optimize inclusion, whilst limiting commercialization and control. This might involve some of the practices witnessed in Finsbury Park: for example, bringing activities out of dedicated spaces, and staging festivals that involve incidental engagement and co-produced content. Even when spaces are programmed with activities and events, it is important to allow flexibility and turbulence (Wynn, 2015) so that park space remains loose (Franck & Stevens, 2007). The example of La Clave Fest—where people were able to access freely and co-produce their own festivities—is a good example.

It is also important that park programming allows room for spontaneity and informality. Events and activities can be great ways to enhance park inclusivity, but there is also a need to facilitate non-events and inactivity. Over-programming means there is less scope for more organic and impromptu activities to happen, including activities that are not officially sanctioned, such as slacklining, barbecues, parties, and demonstrations. These provide opportunities for people to connect with others and so relaxing park rules might increase the diversity of activities and people that occupy parks. Parks are places to connect with others and build communities, but we should also protect their potential to facilitate solitary, contemplative, and quiet experiences. Parkinson (2020), writing about her experiences in Finsbury Park during the coronavirus pandemic, sums this up beautifully: "the incongruity of parks is that they are where one can go simultaneously to have time alone and feel part of a community. That is a neat magic trick."

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