



Exploring young people's interactions with 'Green Spaces'

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In collaboration with National Youth Agency and University of Cumbria.

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Executive Summary

A group of Young Researcher's from the National Youth Agency's Young Researchers Network decided that they wanted to conduct a research project to explore interactions young people had with green spaces in England. The importance of green spaces to everyone during the COVID-19 restrictions has been important for the researchers and they wanted to understand if this was the case for more young people across England.

The data collection obtained 55 responses to the survey which contained closed and open questions from young people aged 16 to 25. The responses showed that young people were interacting with local green spaces on a weekly basis with a mixture of results for participants using this space to relax, socialise or conduct activities. The results showed that young people's perception of green spaces is with the presence of trees and other plants and in the absence of pollution or buildings. We also addressed youth involvement in organisations and decision making to see how much of a voice young people have in their green spaces. A lower percentage were already involved with an environmental organisation (27%), but those who were not involved would take up an opportunity to be involved in the activity of one (40%). Young people also showed a willingness to have their voice heard on local policy around green spaces (88%), but their opinion on if they could as young people change policy was low (18%).

We hope that this study will highlight the need for young people's voices to be heard around the management of green spaces that they value and use on a weekly basis. Third sector organisations and government should ensure they listen to young people and work alongside them in these spaces.

Introduction

In collaboration with the University of Cumbria, the National Youth Agency gathered a group of young people to carry out research which involved young people; our chosen topic was **exploring young people's interaction with 'green spaces'**.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed young people's daily lives. Green spaces were an important place for everyone to be able to go to and explore, especially young people who would not have the opportunity to socialise in other areas that were closed, for example, youth centres or extra-curricular places. We wanted to understand how young people were interacting with green spaces, what they think of these spaces, if they were connected with an environmental organisation and if they felt like they could make change in policy to the green spaces around them.

The survey was sent out to young people aged 16-25 in England to understand their opinions on this.

Context

We chose the topic collaboratively for many reasons, which include the fact that we were interested in how young people of various ages interact with green space, and whether or not they had any particular involvement with any organisations working in maintaining green space or wildlife conservation. In addition to this, young people are often stereotyped as having no interaction with green space and their intention to do so. We wanted to see if this is the or whether we could demonstrate and indeed showcase young people's interest in and interaction with green space. Additionally, we were curious about what young people wanted to see with respect to green space, whether this is more preservation of green space or more youth voice and empowerment. We were keen to understand whether or not they believed as young people they have the opportunity to voice their opinions to government on infrastructure and green spaces and whether or not they felt they would be heard. Finally, we understand that there are many feasible opportunities for young people to get involved with environmental organisations, so we wanted to know if any of the individuals who participated in our research were involved or wanted to be involved with the wildlife and conservation sector in the present or future.

Methodology

As a group, we considered different approaches we could take towards the research project and the positives and negatives of each form. We concluded that a mixed method approach gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. The balance that this gave us between quantitative and qualitative data meant that we could hear young people's own opinions to qualitative research, while also gathering numerical data which allowed us to make valid comparisons.

In order to achieve this mixed method approach on the short timescale available to us we decided that a questionnaire would be an ideal way of getting rapid responses and under the extraordinary circumstances brought about by Covid- 19 it was possible to distribute the questionnaire entirely virtually. There are many advantages to using questionnaires. They can reach a large audience and can generate easily quantifiable data through the use of closed, multiple-choice, questions. Additionally, the inclusion of open questions allow participants elaborate on their answers to other, closed, questions, which can allow a more in-depth understanding of their views. There are other strengths to using questionnaires for examples, we could recruit participants in different locations by means of social media. This potentially enabled us to get a large range of views and data from different locations. As well as this, they are very adaptable and are accessible to a larger range of individuals who could be possible candidates to participate in our research. All the questions from the survey and some of the results can be found in Appendix 1.

However, there are some limitations with using questionnaires. These include the fact that we cannot check that participants understand the questions and therefore it is possible that we may get some irrelevant answers. Additionally, the answers that we are given are determined by the questions that we ask. It is possible that some of our participants were passionate about or had interesting views on issues relating to green space that we did not ask about. Our data are limited by this possibility. Similarly, we may not have asked participants to elaborate enough on their answers to open or closed questions in subsequent open questions and so may have lost an opportunity to learn the details of their views on or uses of green space.

Due to the effects of Covid-19 and the timescale of our project, face-to-face methods of data collection were not possible. It's possible that we may have been able to gather higher quality qualitative data had been able to run focus groups.

Sample

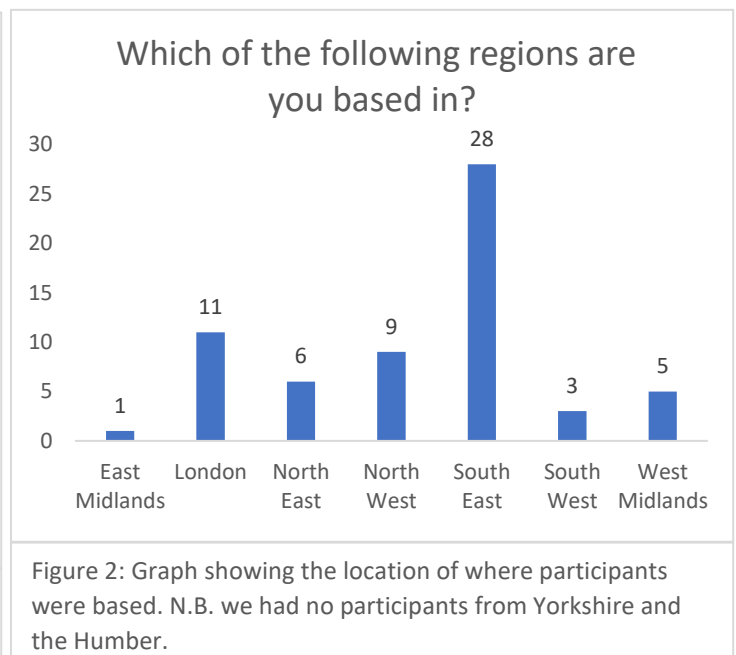
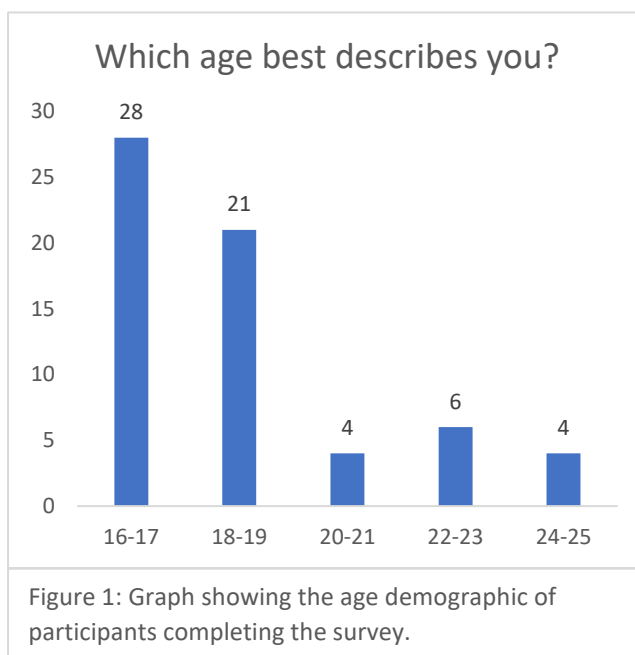
We chose to recruit participants in the age range of 16 to 25 years. This was to avoid the need to seek parental consent. We recruited participants living in England only, this was a condition of our association with the NYA. At the outset we hoped to recruit participants sufficiently broad geographical spread to compare two different areas of England, but this was not possible in the time available. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants, chosen in order to maximise the number of responses in the limited time available. This involved the authors sharing the questionnaire with their youth networks, associated with organisations such as the UK Youth Council, UK Youth for Nature, the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts, in addition to the use of social media channels and established channels used by the NYA. In addition to this, the questionnaire was shared with a number of other individuals and organisations that the authors thought would be keen to participate.

Findings and Analysis

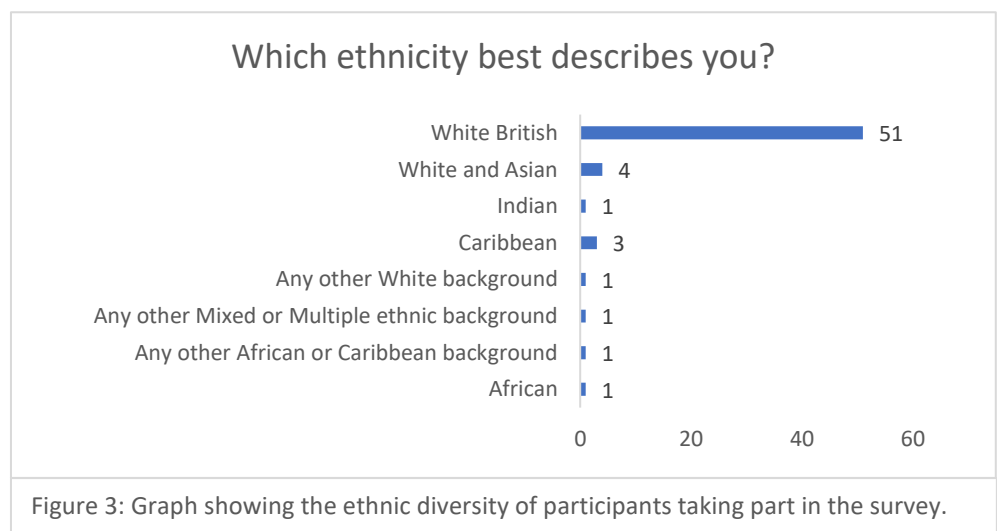
The data that we gathered by means of our questionnaire provided us with tentative answers to some of the questions that we set out to try and tackle. However, the uneven geographical spread and age range of our participants limits the usefulness of the data they provided. With respect to these issues, we would like to see further investigation in the future to understand the motivation behind the answers given, which may further illuminate some of the barriers to young people using green space and engaging with environmental organisations.

Over 75% of our participants were 16 - 19 (inclusive) years of age (figure 1). The reasons for this skew towards the lower end of our age range is not entirely clear.

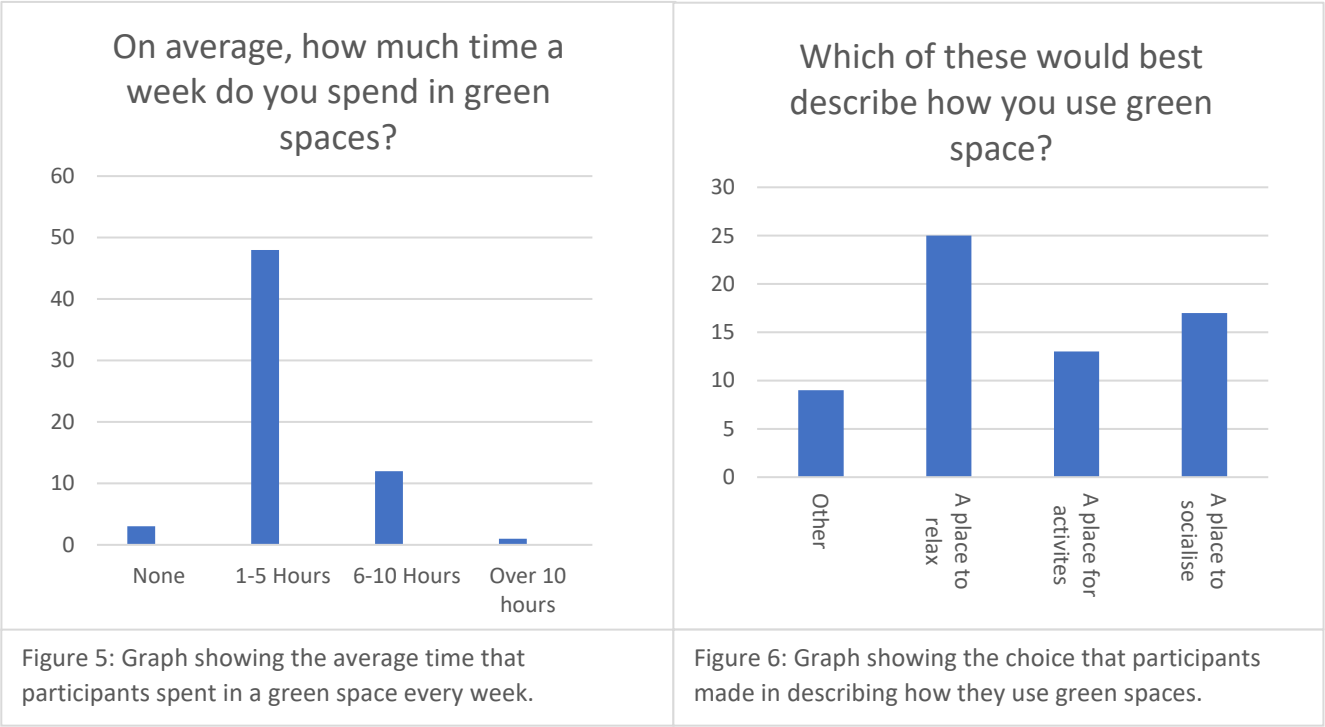
Similarly, in spite of our efforts to share the questionnaire widely, the 62% of our participants were based in London or the South East of England (figure 2). This is probably due to the fact that many of the networks the questionnaire was shared with are based in this area.



In addition to this, over 80% of our participants were from White ethnic backgrounds (figure 3). Given our sample size, this prevents us from making any valid or meaningful comparisons of the way in which young people from different ethnic backgrounds interact with green space.



We found that our participants spent on average 1 to 5 hours per week in local green spaces (figure 4) and the time they spent there was used mainly to relax and socialise (figure 5). The prevalence of the latter activity may be due to Covid-19 restrictions, and the value of interaction with other people, as at the time and the data were gathered it was not possible to meet with others their homes, or in other indoor settings. However, we did not specify whether question should be answered with respect participants’ activities under current restrictions or their activities under ‘normal’ circumstances. If it is the case, it makes sense that socialising is one of the key reasons that young people are accessing outside space at the time of writing.



In addition to this there is strong evidence that time spent in nature reduces stress levels and is therefore beneficial for mental health, so it is interesting that we found that relaxing is one of the main activities for which young people access green space which indicates that they understand the links between green space and the ability to relax effectively.

Forms of exercise are also restricted at the time of writing, and amateur team sports such as rugby and football are not permitted at present. It is possible that had we gathered data in a ‘normal’ time we would see a larger number of young people using green space for sports activities.

Are you, or have you been involved in any local environmental organisations?

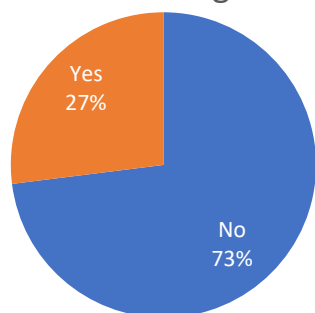


Figure 7: Graph showing the percentage of participants who are involved in a local environmental organisation.

If no, would you want to be involved in something?

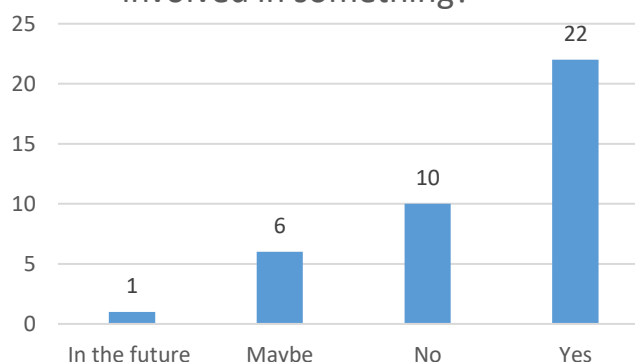


Figure 9: Graph showing the answers to whether participants would like to be involved in a local environmental organisation (from those who are not already involved).

27% of our participants are or have been, involved with local or national environmental organisations or programs (figure 7), which are showcased below (figure 8).

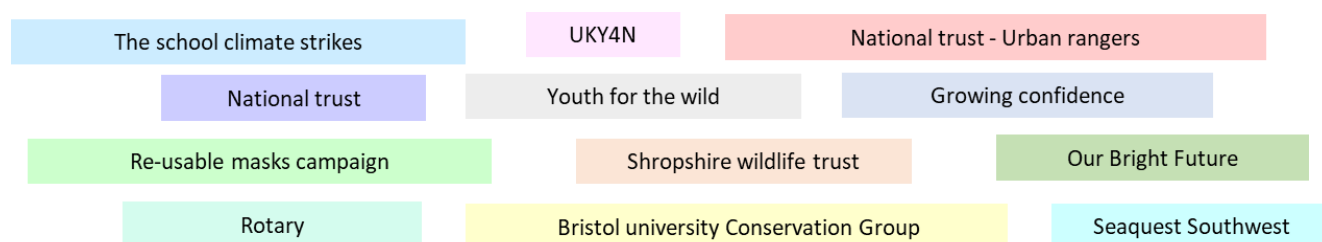


Figure 8: Diagram showing the different national and local environmental organisations that participants cited.

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of those who had had no involvement with environmental organisations said they would want to be involved with such an organisation at some point in the future (figure 9), although some people have preferences such as they would like to be involved in more fitness based environmental opportunities e.g. plogging. Others said that they would like to be involved with environmental or conservation organisations after the Covid-19 crisis comes to an end.

During the Covid 19 crisis many organisations working with young people in the environmental sector and elsewhere have been running activities online, but many others have not. Whether or not the opportunities that they offer will still be available after the crisis is not clear.

Do you think that young people have the opportunity to influence government policy?

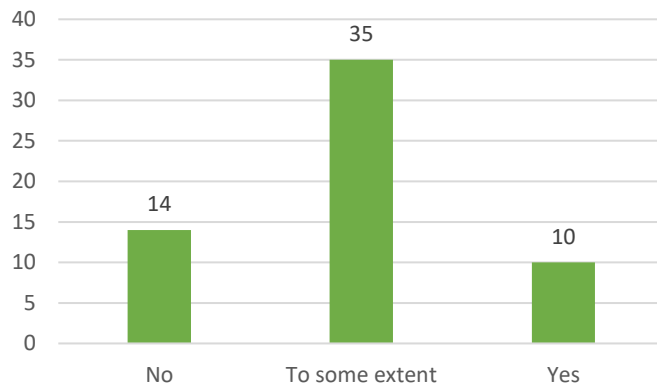


Figure 10: Graph showing whether participants thought that young people could influence government policy.

Finally, a key aspect of youth engagement is youth voice, and whether or not young people feel as if their opinions are being heard. Our project participants overwhelmingly felt that they had the ability to influence government policy 'to some extent' (figure 10). The reason for this is unclear.

Additionally, 88% of our participants said that they would like to have a say in government policy, infrastructure and what happens within their local green spaces (figure 11). This would indicate that young people are not uninterested in local green space.

It seems likely, however, that many of our participants feel as if they will not be listened to if they voice their views on them, and will not be able to influence decision makers. Therefore, we can see that more needs to be done in order to make young people feel heard and to equip them with the skills in order to make their own voices and opinions heard.

Would you like a say in Government policy, infrastructure and what happens with your local green spaces?

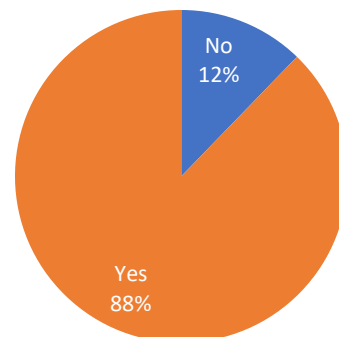


Figure 11: Graph showing whether participants would like a say in government policy around infrastructure and what happens in local green spaces.

Other areas of concern raised by our participants included clearing trees to build flood defences, littering, local planning and development, happiness and well-being, physical and mental health and the under-representation of young people and the natural world to Parliament.

Conclusion

Although this was only a very small study, it illustrates the interactions and value young people have with green spaces, but also the huge issues that exist regarding the opportunities available for young people to get involved with environmental organisations and their ability to influence local government policy on how green spaces are managed. While there are numerous youth engagement projects run by such organisations the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts these are often limited in their geographical range and tend to be short-term due to funding issues.

As noted above it is not clear what opportunities that were available before the Covid-19 pandemic and currently are unavailable will become available again when current restrictions ease. Whatever the case, it will arguably be more important than ever to preserve what opportunities there currently exist and create new ones for the future. Young people are the future and therefore, they should feel like they have a say in what happens to the world they will inherit.

Another clear point indicated by our results is that youth voices are underrepresented, especially within decision-making, and that young people want to have a say on central local government policies relating to green spaces. However, most think they will be heard only to limited extent. This needs to change, as young people's voices are as valid as anybody else's, especially around decisions which will affect young people.

Recommendations

Firstly, we would encourage this study to be expanded across England and the UK to increase the number of responses as this was only a small study to get a better understanding of young people's interactions with green spaces across the UK.

We believe that young people should be given greater opportunities for consultation on the policies surrounding green spaces as they will surely be affected by them from their interactions in these spaces and the value that they place on them. Our results indicate that many young people would like to be involved with third sector environmental organisations and to be able to influence government policy on green space but that the opportunities and means for them to do so are insufficient. We would like government departments to understand the importance of youth voice in their policies around local green spaces.

We hope that young people reading this report will feel more confident to find the opportunities that they could be part of and to know that they can create change. It is key that youth empowerment is a part of every environmental organisation and that young people are supported to use their voice and shown that they have the power to create and influence changes. It is possible for youth empowerment structures to be created that would increase the reach of youth voice, would encourage young people to have confidence and feel that they are being heard. There is much work that needs to be done.

Contact and Enquiries

If you would like to enquire further about this report, please contact the National Youth Agency by emailing: yrn@nya.org.uk

Appendix 1 – Survey Questions

1

Do you understand the information provided above about this research project?



2

Do you feel you have enough information about the study to take part?



3

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal?

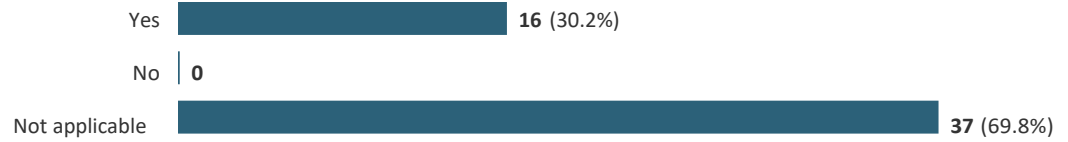


4

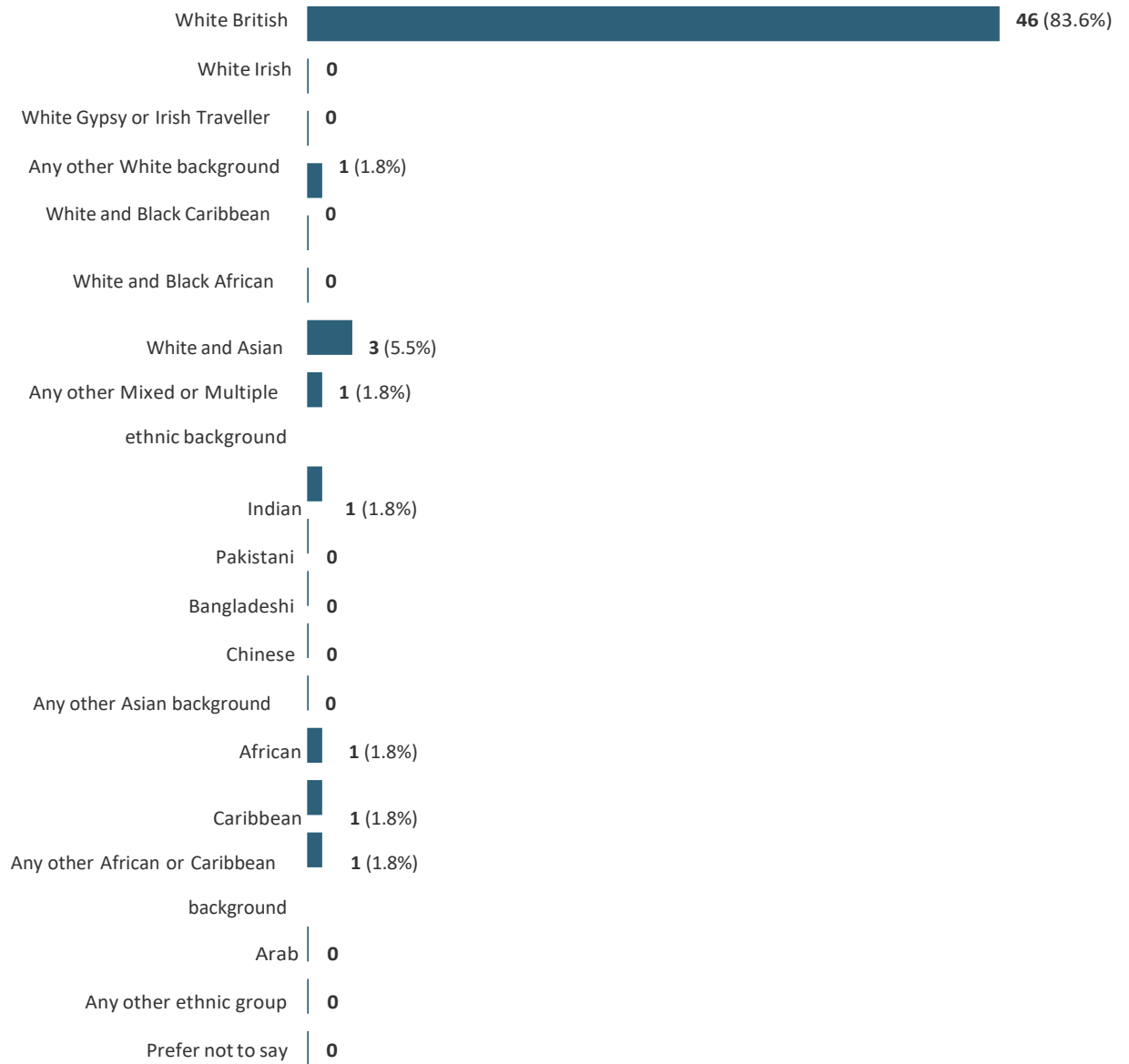
Your responses will be anonymised. Do you give permission for members of the research team to analyse and quote your anonymous responses?



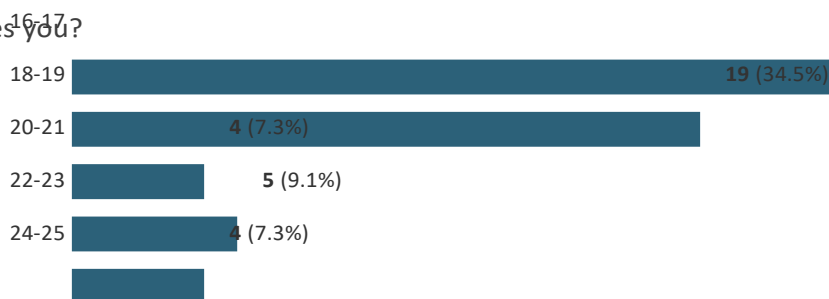
5 If you are 16 can you please confirm that your parents or guardians know you are taking part in the research?



6 Which ethnicity best describes you?



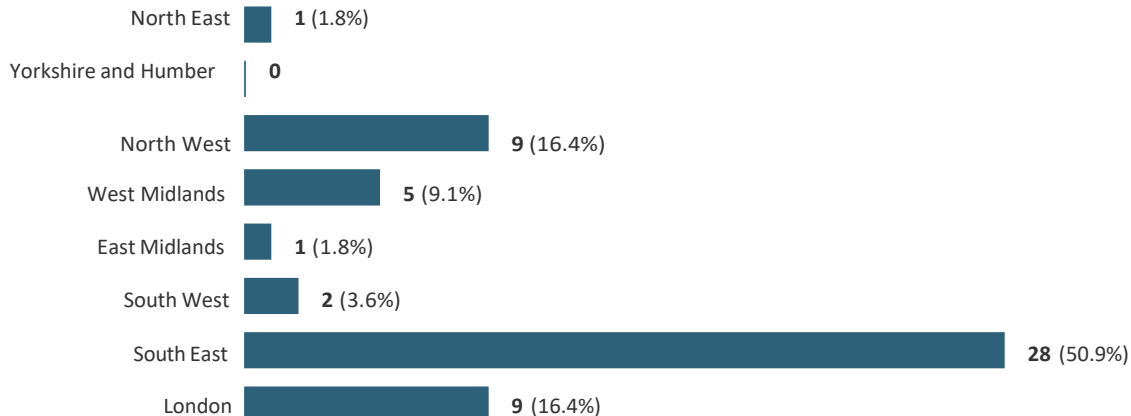
7 Which age best describes you? 23 (41.8%)



8 Which of these best describes your current living environment?



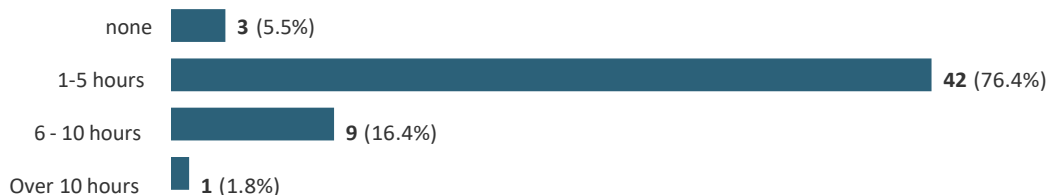
9 Which of the following regions are you based in?



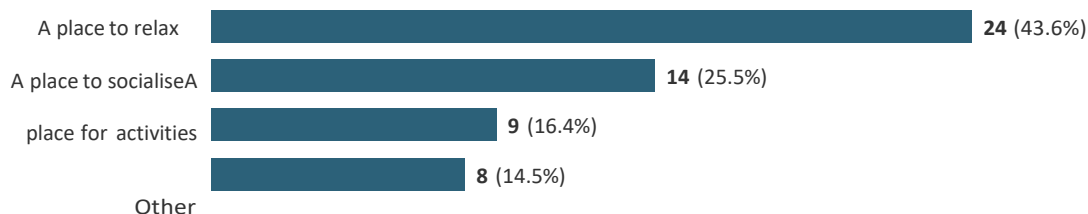
10 How do you define 'green space' or 'open space'?

Showing first 5 of 53 responses	
An area which is broad, and can be like a forest or field	684137-684128-70467457
Somewhere to go to walk, spend time away from the 'city centre'.	684137-684128-70467471
Somewhere outdoors	684137-684128-70467965
an area of grass	684137-684128-70467941
Open area of land which may or may not be open to the public	684137-684128-70467976

11 On average, how much time a week do you spend in green space?



12 Which of these would best describe how you use green space?



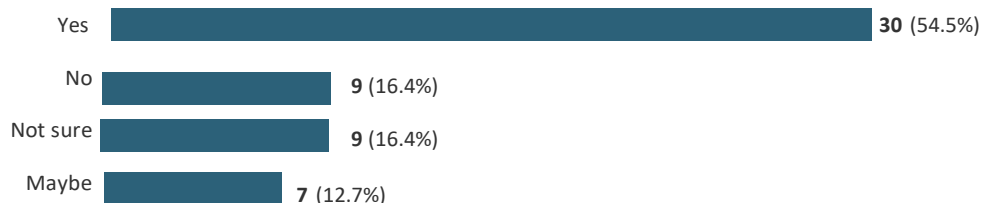
12.a If you use green space in more than one way, please let us know how else you use it:

Showing first 5 of 28 responses	
All of the above and for experiencing the little amount of nature on offer in busy Urban spaces	684137-684128-70470770
A place to socialise and relax	684137-684128-70472046
To socialise	684137-684128-70472292
Exercise	684137-684128-70472271
Probably all 3 of the above	684137-684128-70472411

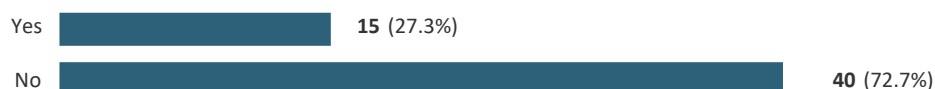
12.b If you selected Other, please specify:

Showing first 5 of 6 responses	
Fitness	684137-684128-70467457
Taking photography photos of these areas	684137-684128-70472046
Walk the dog	684137-684128-70473304
Walking through it	684137-684128-70653950
Sport	684137-684128-70678568

13 Would you say your local green spaces are well maintained?



14 Are you, or have you been involved in any local environmental organisations?



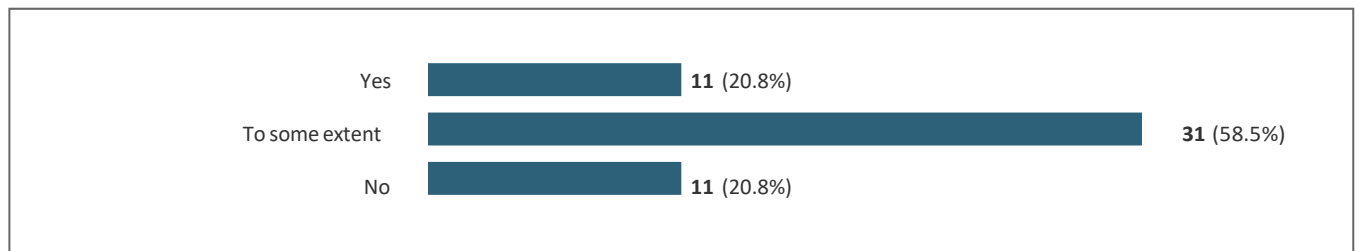
14.a If yes, what is it called?

Showing first 5 of 14 responses	
Groundwork UK	684137-684128-70467965
Re-usable masks campaign	684137-684128-70467941
National trust - Urban rangers	684137-684128-70467976
John Murr Trust	684137-684128-70554191
National trust	684137-684128-70569799

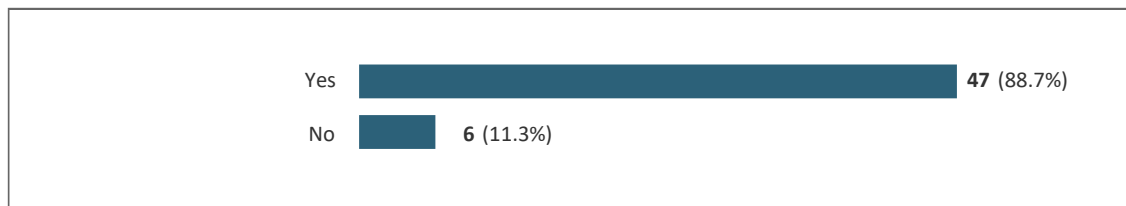
14.b If no, would you want to be involved in something?

Showing first 5 of 33 responses	
yes	684137-684128-70467457
No	684137-684128-70472201
Maybe in the future but currently no	684137-684128-70472046
Yes	684137-684128-70472292
No	684137-684128-70472271

15 Do you think that young people have the opportunity to influence government policy?



16 Would you like a say in Government policy, infrastructure and what happens with your local green spaces?



17 Any other comments?

Showing first 5 of 6 responses	
None	
No	
Can they please stop cutting down trees for flood defences where there is clear and obvious other spaces for the defences to go without killing hundreds of trees	
Overall my local green spaces are well maintained I'd say, the main reason why I think they could be better maintained is the amount of litter that accumulates. I would like to be able to put my input into views into local planning for more housing development in my area for example., but I understand I am very poorly informed so my views may not actually effect the eventual outcome as there are a lot of issues to consider.	