



# Attitudes to Green Space in Rural Irish Towns



## Introduction

This project aims investigate and analyses the perceptions and use of public town parks in rural Irish towns through surveying the park and the local community. The two parks being surveyed in this study are Loughnaneane Park in Roscommon Town and Albert Reynolds Peace Park in Longford town.

Public town parks are important because, they provide a space for people to exercise, relax and socialise and are freely accessible. Studies investigating where people exercise have repeatedly shown that many people use their neighbourhood parks and that studies have also shown that parks are relatively underutilised. If parks are to attract more visitors across a broad cross-section of the population and facilitate increased physical activity, research is needed to better understand park visitor characteristics and how visitors spend their time in parks. The research objective is to identify what information is currently available and what factors affect the use of parks.

## Experimental Methods

To study peoples use and perceptions of the two town parks, three survey methods were carried out to measure quality, observation of use and people's perceptions of the parks based on existing methods in use.

The Neighbourhood Green Space Tool (NGST) was used to audit the parks environmental and physical features. It assessed the parks access, recreational facilities, amenities, natural features, incivilities and usage and each park got a score out of 100, when the scores from these areas, except its usage, was combined.

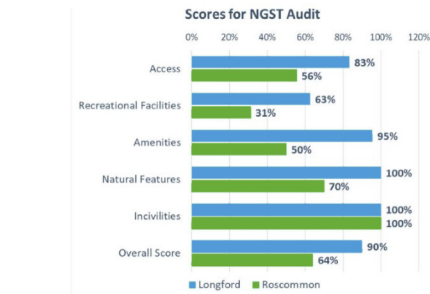
The SOPARC method survey peoples use of the two parks. This was carried out over six days, three days in each park of which one was during the weekend and one was during a weekday. The parks were split into eight areas and people were observed in them areas five times a day. The activities park users were doing and their age groups were noted.



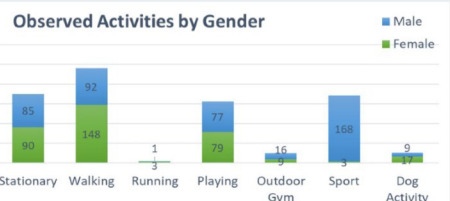
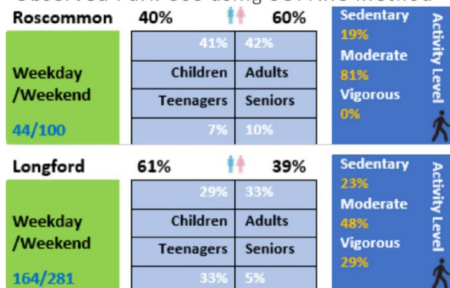
Roscommon Park (Above)

Longford Park (Right)

A questionnaire was sent out to people based in the areas around the two parks asking respondents about their use and perceptions of the park. The questionnaire was split into five sections, four of which were mostly quantitative and one of which was qualitative.



### Observed Park Use using SOPARC Method



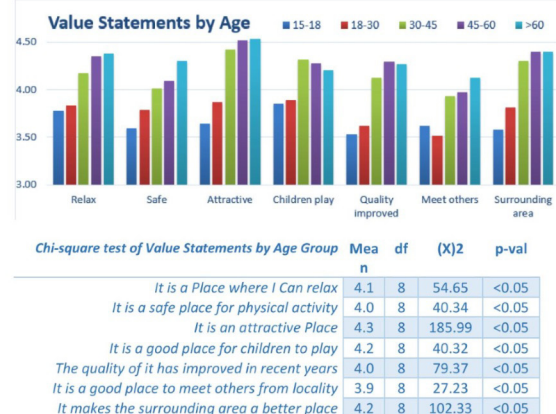
Respondents answered the survey online on SurveyMonkey, except for respondents from two secondary schools who answered on paper and their responses were then uploaded onto SurveyMonkey. The data from the surveys was then exported to a Microsoft Excel document to be analysed.

## Results



### How the Local Communities Value their Park

A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure how respondents valued their town park ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). All 7 statements were positively worded therefore higher scores indicated a higher value. It was observed that there was a correlation between increasing age and increased value scores. A chi-square test was applied for each value statement and all were found to have a significant association between age group and higher level of agreement.



### Age Groups in the Communities who use the Parks

To see if the amount of people using the park per age group was proportional to the CSO figures from the Irish 2016 Census a chi-squared test was done.

A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to examine whether the observed proportions for age groups observed using the park differed from the actual proportions for age groups living in each town. This chi square goodness of fit test showed a significant difference in the observed and expected number of persons observed using the park in each age group for both parks. In Longford ( $\chi^2 = 564$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) a greater number of teenagers ( $n = 198$ ) observed than the number of teenagers ( $n = 49$ ) expected based on 2016 census data. In Roscommon ( $\chi^2 = 51$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) a greater number of children ( $n = 76$ ) observed than the number of children ( $n = 37$ ) expected based on 2016 census data.

	Longford Town Park n=609, p-value <0.001			Roscommon Town Park n=188, p-value <0.001		
	Observed	Expected	D	Observed	Expected	D
Children	174 (29%)	133 (22%)	11.9	76 (40%)	37 (20%)	39.2
Teens	198 (33%)	48 (8%)	457	13 (7%)	15 (8%)	0.28
Adults	203 (33%)	329 (54%)	48.2	79 (42%)	98 (52%)	3.60
Seniors	34 (6%)	104 (17%)	46.7	20 (11%)	37 (20%)	8.24

## Conclusions

The study methods used were effective at collecting information for the research project to measure the park quality, usage of the park and perceptions of the local communities.

Recreational facilities and amenities affect usage patterns of rural parks. A third of park users of Longford Townpark were teenagers with teenage boys in particular playing sports while in Roscommon only 7% of users were teenagers.

The facility that most respondents said would make them use the park more often was better lighting in Longford and a walking trail with distances in Roscommon. It was also seen both in the observational study and the results from the questionnaire that people most use the park to exercise (mostly walking), the survey suggested that physical activities were more popular in Longford compared to Roscommon with people going to exercise, walking the dog and to play sports. Roscommon was seen to be more based around a play to spend time with family and/or friends, with family outings, to use playgrounds and meeting friends being more popular in Roscommon than Longford. The top three barriers to using the park were independent of the park.

## Recommendations

For parks in rural Irish towns to attract more people to use them they need to provide a place for people to exercise, most notably more to have walking trails. They should have facilities where people in the community can partake in activities suited to their needs. This could be done by having walking trails, playgrounds, sports facilities, like a pitch or astroturf pitch, and if possible a cycling track. This caters for the needs of people with many different facilities. Parks should also have links to parts of the town where people can easily walk to the park from their house, place of work or school, but should also have parking facilities to accommodate people living in parts of the town located far away from the park or people living in the nearby countryside.