

Meeting	Community Development Committee
Date	7 th July 2026
Report Title	Parks that work for Teenage Girls: Practical Approaches to Inclusive Engagement and Design
Agenda Reference	17
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Officer's Recommendation:

1. That the Officers continue to monitor emerging best practice and explore opportunities to develop similar initiatives locally through Community Development, Parks and Open Spaces, and Youth Engagement programmes.

Background

This report summarises key learning from a recent webinar exploring how local parks and public spaces can be made more welcoming, inclusive and accessible for teenage girls. It also outlines potential opportunities for the Council to consider as part of future parks, open spaces and community engagement programmes.

The session highlighted the significant barriers many teenage girls face in accessing outdoor spaces, alongside practical examples of how local authorities can improve inclusion through design, engagement and targeted activities.

Key Findings

Physical Activity

- Only **one in five girls aged 13–15** currently meet recommended physical activity guidelines.
- Levels of participation decline significantly during adolescence compared with boys.

Importance of Parks

Parks provide an important "third space" outside of home and school where young people can:

- develop independence;
- socialise with friends;
- improve physical and mental wellbeing; and
- participate in activities without the expectation of spending money.

Accessible and welcoming public spaces therefore play an important role in supporting young people's health and wellbeing.

Challenges Faced by Teenage Girls

The webinar highlighted several reasons why teenage girls are often underrepresented in parks and recreational spaces:

- During puberty, girls are more likely to experience anxiety and mental health challenges.

- Boys' friendship groups often expand during adolescence, whereas girls may become more socially isolated.
- Many facilities aimed at teenagers are designed around traditional sports, including:
 - Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs)
 - football pitches
 - skate parks

Research suggests that approximately **90% of users of these facilities are boys or men**, leaving many girls feeling excluded.

In addition:

- older girls frequently feel uncomfortable using children's play areas;
- parents may perceive them as "too old" to use playground equipment;
- concerns about being judged or viewed as disruptive discourage participation.

What Teenage Girls Say They Want

Engagement with teenage girls in several local authority projects identified common priorities, including:

- communal swings;
- seating and picnic benches for socialising;
- climbing structures that offer elevated viewpoints;
- natural planting and green spaces;
- opportunities for creative activities rather than organised sport.

Girls consistently expressed a preference for spaces that encourage social interaction, relaxation and informal play.

Best Practice Example

Friends Garden – Rowntree Park, York

A case study presented during the webinar showcased the **Friends Garden** at Rowntree Park in York.

The project involved teenage girls in co-designing a dedicated area within the park, ensuring the space reflected their needs and preferences. The result was a welcoming environment that encouraged greater use by teenage girls while increasing feelings of ownership and belonging.

This collaborative design approach was identified as a model of good practice.

Wider Engagement Ideas

The webinar also showcased a range of complementary initiatives that have successfully encouraged greater participation by teenage girls, including:

- free "Make Space" festivals held within local parks;
- dance workshops;
- photography sessions;
- roller skating and rollerblading;
- basketball;
- yoga;
- creative arts activities;
- nature-based events.

Successful programmes involved partnerships with local organisations, community groups and businesses, with activities spread throughout the year rather than delivered as one-off events.

Additional ideas included:

- installing signage explaining that areas have been co-created with local teenage girls;

- organising professional photoshoots featuring local girls enjoying the park to create positive campaign imagery;
- raising awareness through local media and radio interviews highlighting why some girls currently feel unwelcome or unsafe in public spaces;
- celebrating project successes to encourage wider participation.

Opportunities for the Council

There is potential to build on these ideas locally by considering:

- using Youth Allocation or Community Choices funding to support a co-designed "Friends Garden" within an existing park;
- engaging directly with local secondary schools to involve teenage girls in the design process;
- developing a programme of free activities specifically aimed at teenage girls;
- working with local voluntary organisations, sports clubs and creative groups to deliver activities;
- incorporating findings into future Parks and Open Spaces strategies and community engagement programmes.

Conclusion

The webinar demonstrated that relatively modest changes to the design and programming of parks can have a significant impact on making public spaces more welcoming for teenage girls.

By involving young people in the design process, providing informal social spaces alongside traditional sports facilities, and offering targeted activities, the Council has an opportunity to improve health, wellbeing and community participation among a group that is often underrepresented in public open spaces.



Figure 1: Image Created by ChatGPT June 2026