

Meeting in the park: Are dog owners who talk to one another contributing to social capital and is this a valid tool to promote responsible pet ownership?

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Abstract

The social capital concept is central to many areas of public policy: from public health, to recreation and urban planning, community development and ecologically sustainable development. Broadly speaking, positive social relationships have been linked to improvements in physical and mental health, social cohesion, economic development and the quality of governance.

It is my thesis that dogs promote positive social contact between humans¹. This ranges from casual encounters in the street or park to more meaningful social relationships. I believe this is a valid form of social capital that has been ignored by most social and urban planners.

At last year's conference, I looked at social capital theory with Ian Henderson of the City of Port Phillip. We looked at its possible relevance to UAM using the Port Phillip case study. Port Phillip has embraced the notion of pets as social capital and has incorporated it into its repertoire of UAM tools.

This year I want to take the analysis a step further by looking at a wider cross section of communities and having more in-depth conversations with a range of people that walk their dogs regularly. I will explore how and why relationships develop between dog owners, what these relationships mean to people and their potential role in UAM.

Introduction

I have been involved in UAM for many years and for most of that time I have been intrigued by the conversations dog owners have with other dog owners in parks.

My interest in this topic dates back to 1995 when I was doing the research for *Public Open Space and Dogs*. I found a study undertaken in the Netherlands that found people are more likely to nod or say hello to a person with a dog than to a person without a dog. A bit later, I was in the US and came across groups of dog owners who were actively engaged with one other in their local park. What really sparked my interest was the story of a group of dog owners who had taken it in turns to take another person's dog to the park whilst its owner was laid up with a broken leg. As a planner I was intrigued by this demonstration of community in action.

Since then I have lost count of the stories I've heard of dog owners getting to know one another through their dog. In some cases people get to know others well but in the majority of cases, the visit to the park and the chats with other dog owners are just an enjoyable outing.

Essentially it seems to work like this:

- 1 When dog owners meet other dog owners in a park, they often talk to one another. The dogs start to play whilst the owners watch and talk.
- 2 When the same people go to the same park at the same time of the day, they might nod or ask how xxx is today. Universally, it seems that if people move on to this stage, they learn the dogs' names before they ever exchange names themselves. They talk about "safe" topics like their dogs' ailments and idiosyncrasies; they might share information about dog products or services or what is going on in the local community.
- 3 People might start to adjust the time they visit the park to the times when they are most likely to run into the people they've met.

- 4 Some people then develop more in-depth relationships.
- 5 Some groups of dog owners will hold special events eg breakfasts/lunches/pizza nights in the parks, celebrations for dogs birthdays
- 6 Then they might get organised. The Pug Park group meet at Elsternwick Park on Sundays, ELCARDO and Alma Dogs have formal memberships. This invariably depends on one or two very motivated people. Sometimes it might arise because of a perceived threat like loss of off-leash privileges in the park for example.

Last year, Ian Henderson of the City of Port Phillip and I explored this in a tentative way. We highlighted many examples of social interaction in a range of contexts. However just as importantly we argued there was potential for local authorities to use these dynamics as a valid UAM tool for securing responsible pet ownership.

This year I was asked to take this study a step further. I could have looked at a range of different social contexts but decided to restrict the study to the social dynamics that occur in parks.

In particular, the study sought to examine and understand:

- If dogs are a social lubricant to different levels of social interaction amongst dog owners.
- If there was any evidence of the social capital concept associated with dog owners talking to one another in parks.
- Whether a particular park environment encourages social interaction amongst dog owners.
- If there are causal links between people congregating in the parks and responsible pet ownership.³
- If visits to the park are as important to dog owners as they are to their dogs.⁴
- Whether these interactions amongst dog owners are largely incident free and if so why.
- Whether more women than men are represented in the groups of congregating dog owners.

Method

The study looked at 6 case study parks in Melbourne where dog owners are known to congregate and talk to one another. The parks are listed in Table 1. The aim was to get a range of park sizes, types and geographic locations.

Three of the parks have formalised dog owners groups. One of the parks (Berwick) was mistakenly taken to be an off-leash park. We decided to keep it in the study as it might provide a diversity of response.

Table 1: Parks included in the study

Park	Municipality	Location	Description
Alma Park St Kilda	Port Phillip C	Inner suburban	•Heavily used by a range of passive recreation pursuits. •Has an organised dog owners group called Alma Dogs.
Eltham Lower Park	Nilumbik S	Outer north	•Very large park used for both active and passive recreation including cricket/lacrosse, pony club, a track used by walkers, cyclists, joggers and picnickers. •Playground and sports oval in different well separated part of the park. •Did have an organised dog owners group

			ELCARDO.
Princes Park Carlton	Melbourne C	Inner suburban	•Very large multi use park
Elsternwick Park Brighton	Glen Eira C	Middle ring bayside	•Large multi use park that attracts dog owners from a very wide area. Has a group of pug owners that meet every Sunday morning and a poodle group that meets on Saturdays.
Rathmines Reserve East Hawthorn	Boroondara C	Middle ring suburb.	•Sports Oval shared with organised football/cricket. •Playground in different well separated part of the park.
Berwick Park	Casey C	Outer east	•An on leash park used by a small group of people as an off-leash park.

The study included a survey of dog owners, 2 in-depth key stakeholder interviews with key users of 2 of the parks and a period of participant observation in each park to better understand the park dynamics. The qualitative elements were very important. If I had contained the study to quantitative method only, I would have missed numerous opportunities to explain and/or validate the responses obtained in the survey through the qualitative research tools.

These tools are described below.

Surveys

- The survey was trialed in Edinburgh Gardens, North Fitzroy in July 2005 (another park where dog owners are known to congregate).
- 120 surveys were undertaken over a 5 week period in August and September 2005.⁶
- Researchers approached any dog owner they saw in the park and asked if they would mind completing the survey. The researchers completed the surveys by writing answers on the survey form.
- No one refused to participate although 2 people took the survey away and later returned the completed survey by fax/ email.
- I undertook the surveys in 3 of the parks whilst 3 of my staff undertook the surveys in the remaining three parks.
- The surveys were completed at a range of times of the day/ week and weather conditions. No surveys were completed in the rain.

Key informant interviews

- 2 in-depth interviews were held with representatives of Alma Dogs and ELCARDO.
- I undertook both interviews, which were 60-90 minutes long, taped and later transcribed.
- We also spoke to a Council representative about each park to identify any issues that might exist with dog owners using the park.

Participant observation

- We took our dogs with us as much as possible in the selection of the parks and whilst we were undertaking the surveys. This enabled us to mingle amongst dog owners and better understand the parks and the social dynamics occurring therein.
- The researchers were asked to observe and comment on activity and conditions in the park.

RESULTS

Gender and age of respondents

A significant result from the survey was that overall women represented 80% of survey respondents (table 2). The figure reached 90% in Eltham Lower Park and 86% in Elsternwick Park but was only 55% in Alma Park. This supports the proposition that more women than men are represented in the groups of dog owners that talk in parks.

The age distribution was relatively even with the strongest representation from the middle years from 31-60 years (table 3). This result was not unexpected.

Table 2: Gender of respondents

	Female	Male
Alma Park	11	9
Eltham Lower Park	18	2
Princes Park	17	3
Elsternwick Park	20	3
Rathmines Reserve	15	5
Berwick Park	15	2
Total	96 (80%)	24 (20%)

Table 3: Age of Respondents

	Not Stated	0-18	19-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60+
Alma Park	1	2	1	5	7	4	-
Eltham Lower Park	-	-	1	2	3	7	7
Princes Park	-	1	5	6	1	7	-
Elsternwick Park	1	1	4	5	6	4	2
Rathmines Reserve	-	-	2	3	5	5	5
Berwick Park	-	1	4	8	1	3	-
Total	2 (1.6%)	5 (4.2%)	17 (14.2%)	29 (24.2%)	23 (19.2%)	30 (25%)	14 (11.6%)

Importance of the park visits

The surveyed dog owners were largely committed users of their park with 76.2% visiting daily or several times of the week. This only varied at Berwick and Elsternwick Park (table 4).

In relation to length of stay, it was instructive that 62.6% of respondents stay longer than 30 minutes on average (table 5).

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of these visits to the park to their day or week on a scale of 1-10. 43% of respondents rated the park 10 (table 6).

Table 4 Q1: Can I ask you how often you visit this park?

	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once fortnightly	Once a month or less	Only been here once before	Never been here before
Alma Park	10	10	-	-	-	-	-
Eltham Lower Park	10	7	1	-	2	-	-
Princes Park	16	4	-	4	-	-	-
Elsternwick Park	3	7	4	5	3	-	-
Rathmines Reserve	12	5	2	-	1	-	-
Berwick Park	2	6	5	3	-	1	-
Total	53 (43%)	39 (31%)	12 (9%)	12 (9%)	6 (4%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)

Table 5 Q4: On average, how long do you stay at this park?

	0-30 minutes	30-60 mins	60-90 mins
Alma Park	8	11	1
Eltham Lower Park	1	12	7
Princes Park	9	5	8
Elsternwick Park	8	9	5
Rathmines Reserve	9	10	1
Berwick Park	10	6	1
TOTAL	45 (37.5%)	53 (44.2%)	22 (18.3%)

Table 6 Q27: How important are these visits to the park to your day or week? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10 where 0 is very unimportant and 10 is very important.

	0-4	5-6	7-9	10
Alma Park	1	1	12	6
Eltham Lower Park	-	2	6	12
Princes Park	1	1	9	9
Elsternwick Park	9	4	4	6
Rathmines Reserve	-	1	8	11
Berwick	-	2	7	8
Total	11 (9.16%)	11 (9.16%)	46 (38.3%)	52 (43.3%)

Social interaction

Respondents were very likely to talk to other dog owners (table 6). 70% of respondents would *always* or *mostly* talk to other people. Many respondents said that this depended as much on whether other people were available in the park to talk to as it did to their personal inclination.

It is the dogs that overwhelmingly start conversations between dog owners. 94.2% of respondents said the dogs start the conversation (table 7). Either the dogs start playing and the owners start talking or a dog greets another dog owner and that person responds by talking to the dog's owner. Easy conversation starters include the dog's name or age, a query about the breed and the dog's distinctive features and demeanour.

Respondents were asked how many dog owners they speak to at the park (table 8). 84% of respondents said that they spoke to between 1-6 dog owners on average. Many said the number depended on dog owners being available in the park to talk to.

Two thirds of respondents knew one or more people's names (table 9). One third knew seven or more names whilst one third knew no one's name.

Respondents were asked if they would say hello to people that they speak to in the park if they saw them in the street or at the shopping centre. 97% said they would (table 10).

Respondents were asked if they have gotten to know anyone as more than a passing acquaintance through talking with other dog owners in the park (table 11). More than a third said they had. Of this group the number of friends made was usually a small handful – they met for coffee, dinners out or arranged to meet at other parks. In each park except Berwick, 1 or 2 people said they had become lifelong friends with other dog owners they'd met in the park. One person at Alma Park was now sharing a house with someone she had met at the park.

Respondents were asked if they had ever learnt anything about their community or what is happening in the area through talking with other dog owners (table 12). 62.5% said they had. They had mostly heard about Council plans for the park and to a lesser extent general local affairs or events.

Table 6 Q10: Do you ever talk to other dog owners?

	Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Alma Park	6	4	10	-	-
Eltham Lower Park	16	2	2	-	-
Princes Park	11	6	3	-	-
Elsternwick Park	5	4	11	3	-
Rathmines Reserve	14	2	4	-	-
Berwick	4	11	1	1	-
Total	56 (46.6%)	29 (24.1%)	31 (25.8%)	4 (3.3%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 7 Q13: What starts the conversation (with a complete stranger?)⁷

	The dog	The weather	Other or Not stated
Alma Park	20	-	-
Eltham Lower Park	17	2	1
Princes Park	20	-	-
Elsternwick Park	22	-	1
Rathmines Reserve	19	-	1
Berwick	15	-	1
Total	113 (94.2%)	2 (1.7%)	4 (3.3%)

Table 8 Q12: On any given visit, how many dog owners would you be likely to speak to?

	0	1-2	3-6	7-10	>10
Alma Park	-	10	7	-	3
Eltham Lower Park	-	4	8	4	4
Princes Park	-	10	8	-	2
Elsternwick Park	1	12	7	1	2
Rathmines Reserve	1	7	6	3	3
Berwick	1	10	6	-	-
Total	3 (2.5%)	53 (44.2%)	42 (35%)	8 (6.6%)	14 (11.6%)

Table 9: Q14: Of the dog owners that you speak to in this park, how many would you know by name?

	0	1-2	3-6	7-10	>10
Alma Park	6	4	1	4	5
Eltham Lower Park	3	-	4	3	10
Princes Park	6	9	4	-	1
Elsternwick Park	1	11	8	-	3
Rathmines Reserve	6	4	3	3	3
Berwick	12	5	-	-	-
Total	34 (28.3%)	32 (26.7%)	21 (17.5%)	10 (8.3%)	22 (18.3%)

Table 10 Q18: If you saw one of the dog owners you talk to in this park in the street or at the shopping centre would you say hello?

	Yes	No
Alma Park	18	2
Eltham Lower Park	20	-
Princes Park	20	
Elsternwick Park	22	1
Rathmines Reserve	20	
Berwick	16	1
Total	116 (96.6%)	4 (3.3%)

Table 11 Q19: Of the dog owners that you speak to in this park, have you gotten to know anyone as more than a passing acquaintance?

	Yes	No
Alma Park	8	12
Eltham Lower Park	12	8
Princes Park	10	10
Elsternwick Park	7	16
Rathmines Reserve	7	13
Berwick	2	15
Total	46 (38.3%)	74 (61.7%)

Table 12 Q20: Have you ever learnt anything about your community or what is happening in the area through talking with other dog owners in this park?

	Yes	No
Alma Park	12	8
Eltham	17	3
Lower Park		
Princes Park	14	6
Elsternwick Park	12	11
Rathmines Reserve	15	
Berwick	5	12
Total	75 (62.5%)	45 (37.5%)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The discussion of findings is grouped around the following themes:

- Social capital;
- Responsible pet ownership;
- Implications for park planning and design; and
- Implications for leisure and recreation.

Social capital

The study revealed examples of social capital:

■ **Social encounters:** There is no doubt dog owners talk to other dog owners in each of these parks. Incidental encounters allow dog owners to stop and talk and in some cases this progresses to regular contact. This happens because the dogs freely interact with one another (more so for example than young children in the playground who are generally more shy). I would suggest this is one of the distinguishing and strongest features of this form of social interaction.

These encounters are valued by dog owners for several reasons:

- 1 owners say the dogs enjoy the experience;
- 2 owners say the dogs need socialisation with other dogs;
- 3 owners say the dogs and their owners present can be relied upon to be responsible;
- 4 owners enjoy watching the dogs at play; and
- 5 owners enjoy the social contact with other dog owners.

I would suggest it is this combination of factors that helps to create strong bonding capital amongst regular dog walkers.

The value placed on these encounters is evidenced by the adjustments people make to the times they visit the park. This wasn't evident from the survey results but was clearly evident from our observation. At each park there is a prime time for dog owners. At Rathmines Reserve for example there will be no one at the park at 4.30pm on a Sunday however by 5.00pm there will be 10-15 dogs and their owners present. At Eltham Lower Park the prime time is 4-6pm on weekdays (later in summer). This is not an adjustment to sport times but people wanting to be there when other dog owners are present.

The regulars appear to be well practised at talking with other dog owners which perhaps explains why so many people said that they come to this park because people are so friendly (many said they had been to other parks where dog owners don't greet one another). However only Alma Park, Elsternwick Park and Eltham Lower Park had any formal organisation and accordingly stronger social networks.

■ **Reciprocity:** there was a high degree of reciprocity evident in Alma Park and Eltham Lower Park with many examples of people sharing the care of their dogs including walking them, having them whilst other people were at work or went away. There were fewer examples of reciprocity in the other parks however the survey was not well set up to uncover such examples.

■ **Improved governance:** A high number of respondents had heard about local events or issues through talking with other dog owners in the park. Mostly however this related to events occurring in the park in question. Many people also cited examples of sourcing products and services suggested by people they had spoken to in the park.

■ **Responsible pet ownership:** the following section deals with the culture of responsible pet ownership in each of these parks.

■ **Sense of place:** there was a strong sense of place amongst regulars at each park, which translates into a culture of pride and responsibility associated with the use of the park and tolerance of other users.

Responsible pet ownership

The parks all work very well as off leash areas. People reported a few scuffles between a pair of dogs or a cross word from other users. However by and large the dog owners all believed their use of the park was largely incident free⁵. This was borne out by our participant observations and interviews with key stakeholders.

I would suggest there are three reasons for this:

1. The dogs that frequent these parks do so regularly are therefore well socialised from a young age. To use the terminology of animal behaviourist Judith Blackshaw, they are engaged in joyful play in neutral territory rather than displaying fearful, protective or excessively dominant behaviours.
2. The dog owners who frequent this park are by and large highly responsible pet owners.
3. Peer group pressures appear to work reasonably well in each of these parks.

The results do not of themselves support our proposition that talking to other dog owners promotes responsible pet ownership. Virtually all respondents described themselves as responsible pet owners already – they said they had no more to learn.

However I think this misses an important part of the causal pathway to responsible pet ownership that was picked up by other survey questions and the in-depth interviews and participant observation.

Each of the parks has a strong culture of responsible pet ownership (picking up poo, making sure your dog doesn't annoy other people, obeying the rules, tolerance towards other users, staying away from the park at times other conflicting users are present).

Respondents all seemed to be aware that the bar was set very high in this park. For some respondents, these standards were the reason they came to the park. In fact the group most disliked after cyclists were the dog owners who didn't measure up. This is primarily because they annoyed respondents but there was also recognition that recalcitrant dog owners might jeopardise the dog owners' place in the park.

This culture of responsible pet ownership that was clearly evident in each of the parks must by implication be inculcated to new regulars. My own view is that local authorities have a role to play in strengthening these norms and values to help make the parks work and to help create a wider culture of responsible pet ownership that spills out into the wider community. As local authorities are increasingly looking for costless and non-regulatory ways to achieve responsible pet ownership I think this is something that certainly warrants further investigation by the UAM community.

Implications for the planning and management of parks for dogs

I oppose the ghettoisation of off leash dogs into isolated fenced areas. Special dog parks are difficult politically to establish and retain, they end up being poorly maintained visual eyesores and they provide a poor level of amenity for dogs and their owners. I truly believe that making shared use of parks work is the best solution for all to work towards. The parks we looked at in this study were all shared use and all worked well. They were well maintained beautiful parks that were highly valued by the local community. There were grievances between and within groups but these weren't significant and in fact there was a high level of tolerance amongst regular users of all groups.

The way sharing works best will be different in each park. It is a matter of identifying the users and working with them to arrive at solutions that works best for everyone.

Local authorities should not be trying to socially engineer social interaction amongst dog owners. However the parks I have seen that provide the best environment for dogs and which promote social interaction have had a number of common elements:

- They are of generous size – large enough to throw a ball for active dogs to retrieve.
- They have a walking circuit within the park which gives dog owners something to do and helps to promote incidental encounters with other dog owners. This seems to be one of the most important elements of the success of the case study parks.
- They have a focal point where dog owners congregate to talk whilst their dogs play. People get to know where the focal point is.
- They have a pleasing aesthetic environment. The look and the feel of the park is very important. It needs to have trees and wide open spaces.
- They are well removed from roads. It does not need to be fenced if it is well removed from roads.
- They are well separated from children's play areas/picnic areas/bicycle paths because many children and their parents are frightened of dogs and because dogs and food/bicycles don't generally mix. This is not to say these areas are not present in the park but the areas are well separated spatially.
- They provide drinking water for dogs and plenty of bins for putting dog poo bags into.
- They might provide a notice board to communicate with dog owners.

It seems that the most popular times for dog owners to congregate is between 4-7pm. However people go at many different times and I would avoid rushing into a timeshare arrangement where dogs are allowed off leash at certain times unless this is really required. The exception to this is beaches where timeshare usually works well.

My own view is that dog agility courses are unnecessary white elephants. They are expensive to build, create public liability concerns and are difficult to justify to the wider community (building playgrounds for dogs when humans are wanting). However this is something each community should decide for itself.

Implications for leisure and recreation

The dog owners surveyed are committed users of their park showing a high frequency of visit, relatively long duration of stay and high level of importance attached to their visits to the park. This has been virtually ignored by leisure researchers as a valid form of leisure perhaps because dog walking seems to be subsumed into the overall data for walking.

The main leisure trends of the last two decades have been a move away from organised and competitive forms of recreation to more informal, passive and spontaneous forms of leisure. Dog walking is consistent with these trends in that can be done any time, anywhere and for any length of time. It doesn't require special clothes or equipment (other than a dog).

I suggest the UAM community needs to be more proactive in integrating dog owners needs into mainstream leisure planning.

A very high proportion of survey respondents were women aged between 30 and 60 years of age. This group is known to have few leisure opportunities due to domestic responsibilities and a reluctance to participate in organised and competitive activity.

As a result the group receives a lot of attention from leisure and recreation researchers and planners seeking to enlarge this group's opportunities.

I believe there is scope for a great deal more research on the place of dogs in meeting this group's leisure needs.

Study limitations

The limitations of this study include its small sample size, the limited number of parks studied and the focus on parks where dog owners are known to congregate. There are many parks where dog owners don't talk to one another. There are also many dog owners who rarely visit a park or who don't walk their dog at all.

It is important not to generalise these findings to the dog owning population at large. Nevertheless I believe the results are indicative of reasonably significant segments of 1) dog owning population and 2) the park using population. And whilst the sample size was relatively small (120 surveys in 6 parks), the number of respondents in each park was reasonably representative of the regular dog walkers in each park.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the phenomenon of dog owners talking to one another in the park. It took 6 in-depth case studies of parks in Melbourne where dog owners are known to congregate and sought to better understand these dynamics using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods.

The following findings are worth highlighting:

- Dog owners are highly likely to talk to other dog owners present in parks. This is because dogs play freely with one another and because dogs provide safe and easy conversation starters.
- Dog owners value these experiences because:
 - ⇒ they say their dogs enjoy the experience;
 - ⇒ they say their dogs need socialisation with other dog owners;
 - ⇒ they say the dogs and their owners present can be relied upon to be responsible.
 - ⇒ they enjoy watching their dogs at play; and
 - ⇒ they enjoy social contact with other dog owners.
- There is evidence that dog owners adjust the times they visit the park to coincide with peak dog owner presence.
- Each of the parks displayed evidence of the social interaction hierarchy discussed in the introduction to this paper. About a third of participants had got to know a handful of people well.
- Three of the parks had formalised structures, which strengthened the social bonds.
- There was evidence of reciprocity in 2 of the parks studied but the survey tool was not well set up to uncover such examples.
- A high number of respondents had heard about local events or issues which is a measure of the improved governance aspects of social capital.
- The surveys did not show a causal link between talking to other dog owners and responsible pet ownership. However there was a strong culture of responsible pet ownership evident in each park with peer group pressures appearing at least by observation to be working well.
- There was a strong sense of place amongst dog owners using each park. Sense of place is a concept that is thought to translate into a culture of care in the public realm and tolerance towards other users. It would be worthwhile studying this concept in greater depth.
- Good parks for dogs and social interaction provide a high level of amenity, a walking route for dog owners and a focal point where dog owners can congregate.

- The dog owners surveyed are committed users of their park. There is considerable scope for more research on the issue of dogs as a form of leisure. The role of dogs in addressing the unmet leisure needs of women between the ages of 30 and 60 is one potential starting point.

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Footnotes:

- ¹ I realise dogs can also promote negative social contact but that doesn't mean we should ignore the positives especially if it can lead to wider improvements in community well being.
- ² I suspected a more confined park environment might promote a higher level of social interaction.
- ³ In other words, do people learn about responsible pet ownership by talking to other dog owners as we suggested last year in the Port Phillip study or is it the responsible pet owners who are making these visits to the park ⁴This is central to the notion of pets as leisure.
- ⁵ If this is the case, it has significant implications for leisure and recreation planning.
- ⁶ 20 in each park except for Berwick n = (17) and Elsternwick Park n = (23).
- ⁷ This was an open ended (unprompted question).
- ⁸ One exception was at Rathmines Reserve where a dog had apparently rushed a junior football player during training a few weeks before our surveys began. Every respondent to the survey and the Council Park Management representative we spoke to mentioned this incident.