

Civic Exchange Survey Shows Strong Public Demand for More Quality Open Space with Different Amenities in Hong Kong

Inclusive Design and Planning Guidelines Should Be Devised to Meet Diverse Needs of Various Demographic Groups

HONG KONG, 24 October 2018 — About 85 per cent of Hong Kong residents visit open space at least once a month and various demographic groups want different open space amenities in their districts, a public opinion survey by Civic Exchange reveals today. Civic Exchange therefore recommends the Government to create inclusive open space design and planning guidelines that can cater to the needs of people of all ages.

The Open Space Opinion Survey polled 3,600 respondents across 18 districts on the quality of open space between January and February 2018. An overwhelming 97 per cent of respondents who are regular users usually visit open space near their homes. Only 15 per cent use open space near work or schools, while 15 per cent regularly travel to open space by public transport, car or bicycle.

With an average density of 32,100 people per square kilometre, Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world and provides only 2.7m² of per capita recreational open space, lagging behind other major Asian cities such as Tokyo (5.8m²), Seoul (6.1m²), and Singapore (7.4m²), according to Civic Exchange's 2017 "Unopened Space" report.

Proximity to Open Space Is Likely to Lower Anxiety

A companion study combining geospatial analysis with data from the opinion survey found that people who live closer to parks and open spaces smaller than 1 hectare are more likely to report less anxiety. The findings also revealed that proximity is more relevant to usage than the total amount of open space available near people's homes. Survey respondents who visited open space more frequently reported feeling happy more in the two weeks preceding the survey, although it was unclear if they were happier people to begin with, or whether frequent visits made them happier.

"Because we have small living space and limited land for public open space development, creating high-quality, inclusive recreational open space is critically important to maintain the psychological well-being of our residents," said Winnie Cheung, CEO of Civic Exchange.

"Our studies have established a link between having easy and frequent access to open space and better emotional well-being. Other studies have also demonstrated the environmental, health, social, and economic benefits that open space brings to a city. We hope our findings will inform policy and lead to more people-centric open space planning and design," she said.

Older Urban Districts Less Satisfied

Among the survey respondents, Sha Tin and Southern residents are most satisfied with the quality of open space in their communities, while those in Wan Chai and Yau Tsim Mong are the least satisfied. Southern District residents enjoy the highest level of waterfront usage in Hong Kong, with about half of the respondents making a visit at least once a month.

In terms of housing types, respondents living in private individual buildings are least satisfied with the quality of open spaces in their neighbourhoods and visit them less often than those living in public housing, Home Ownership Scheme flats, or large private developments.

Those aged 60 and above visit open space almost 14 times a month on average, while 16 to 29-year-olds go to open space 11 times a month. People in their 40s visit open space around nine times a month.

What Different Age Groups Want

Three in four parents want more open space for their children to ride bicycles and scooters; about half of them ask for interactive natural environments and adventure playgrounds.

More than half of the young respondents want to see more barbecue pits and multi-purpose exercise spaces in their neighbourhoods; there is also a noticeable demand for photogenic and comfortable hang-out areas. About 80 per cent of them usually visit open space with friends, while only 22 per cent of elderly respondents do so.

About 58 per cent of the elderly respondents want better safety features such as hand rails, non-slip paving, and better lighting to make open space more elder-friendly.

In the survey, all age groups were asked to pick three out of eight open space amenities for their neighbourhoods. Almost half of them want more shared cycling and jogging paths (47 per cent), shade (47 per cent), places to sit and chat (46 per cent), and lawns (45 per cent).

More Flexible Guidelines Needed

“With our ageing society, special consideration should be paid to the open space needs of the elderly, but a balance needs to be struck to cater for the youth and other demographic groups as well,” said Carine Lai, Civic Exchange Senior Researcher and author of the Open Space Opinion Survey.

“The Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines are too rigid to allow for diversity in open space design and the Pleasure Grounds Regulation (Cap. 132BC) also does little to promote flexible or vibrant activities in open space,” she said. “Tailor-made guidelines should be developed for inclusive open space design to balance the priorities and needs of different demographic groups and districts.”

When asked if the Government should relax regulations on activities that are currently banned in certain open spaces, almost half of the respondents (48 per cent) thought at least one activity should be allowed. But no single activity garnered majority support: walking dogs was the most popular choice (23 per cent), followed by cycling (16 per cent) and playing music (11 per cent).

Lai also urges open space providers to experiment with more creative and flexible management at selected locations. For example, activities such as frisbees, kite-flying, or roller skating could be encouraged in certain zones.

The Government should also engage the local community on the design, planning, and management of open space as residents in different districts have varying needs and preferences, Lai said. In general, Civic Exchange recommends improving the quality of open space in older urban areas and access to the waterfront as well as increasing the amount of shared jogging and cycling facilities, shading, and lawns.



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Disclaimer: The views expressed in the reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust.

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About Civic Exchange

Civic Exchange is an independent Hong Kong public-policy think tank established in 2000. We use in-depth research and dialogue to inform policy and engage stakeholders on addressing environmental and development challenges in Hong Kong. Our research covers four areas that make up a liveable city: environmental, economic, social, and governance. Civic Exchange has been ranked among the top 50 environmental think tanks in the world by the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania since 2011.

About Jockey Club Civic Exchange “Reconnecting Open Space” Programme

The Jockey Club Civic Exchange “Reconnecting Open Space” Programme is a public engagement project that aims to evaluate and raise societal awareness on the quality of open space in Hong Kong. The initiative is funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust and led by Civic Exchange. This one-year project includes an 18-district-wide public opinion survey, capacity-building programmes for tertiary and secondary students, a workshop, a public forum, and a research report on creating inclusive open space in the city.