

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic Exchange conducted a public opinion survey of 3,600 Hong Kong residents across 18 districts on the quality of open space between January and February 2018. The goal was to develop evidence-based recommendations to inform policies on the planning, design, and management of open space as envisioned in “Hong Kong 2030+: Towards a Planning Vision and Strategy Transcending 2030”. In the strategy, the government aims to “reinvent public space” in terms of function, quality, design, accessibility, provision, and management.

The survey’s objectives were to:

- Measure how frequently people use different types of open space and their activities.
- Assess their satisfaction with different dimensions and qualities of open space.
- Gain a clearer understanding of respondents’ attitudes and aspirations towards activities and facilities in open spaces.
- Investigate possible relationships between open space usage and subjective well-being.

In addition to the public opinion survey, four focus groups with eight participants each were held to obtain qualitative insights into people’s views. Three of the focus groups – parents, young adults (aged 18 to 29), and the elderly (aged 60 and above) – focused on their open space needs. The fourth consisted of adults aged 35 to 55 living in housing types including public housing, private individual buildings, and private developments to explore differences in their perceptions of open space quality and attitudes towards the provision of open space by private developers versus the government.

EIGHT TYPES OF OPEN SPACES

Respondents were asked about their visiting habits to eight types of open spaces:

- Small playgrounds and sitting-out areas
- Medium or large parks
- Leisure and Cultural Services Department’s outdoor sports facilities
- Plazas or podium gardens in shopping malls and commercial buildings
- Seafront or riverfront promenades
- Unofficial open spaces
- Open spaces in public housing estates or Home Ownership Scheme estates
- Open spaces in private housing estates

Major findings and recommendations are outlined below:

PROXIMITY AND CONNECTIVITY ARE KEY

Overall, retirees visit open space most frequently, followed by students and homemakers. Retirees mostly go to small playgrounds and sitting-out areas as well as open spaces in public housing estates. People who live with elderly relatives also visit open space more often. This illustrates the importance of open space in an ageing society. In contrast, respondents aged 16 to 29 prefer to use sports facilities or shopping malls.

The vast majority of users (97 per cent) usually visit open space within walking distance of their homes, making this a critical factor in future planning and design. Only 15 per cent go to open space near work or school, while 15 per cent regularly travel to open space by public transport, private car, or bicycle. People who live in public housing estates or large private developments visit open spaces significantly more often than those living in private individual buildings, which lack their own open spaces on the premises.

Frequency of visits to seafront or riverfront promenades also varies by district. Some districts with waterfront promenades such as Southern and Eastern see high rates of waterfront usage, as the waterfronts are adjacent to major housing developments such as South Horizons and Heng Fa Chuen. Other districts such as Kwun Tong, Wan Chai, and Yau Tsim Mong have very low percentages of residents who visit waterfronts at least once a month; the waterfronts in these districts are separated from residential areas by major roads, commercial buildings or industrial areas. Pedestrian connections as well as signage and wayfinding to the waterfronts in these districts need to be improved.

MOST POPULAR ACTIVITIES

Walking (74 per cent) and resting or relaxing (68 per cent) are the most common passive activities. Around 33 per cent say they go to open spaces to socialize, 30 per cent to wait or kill time, and 23 per cent to enjoy fresh air and nature. In terms of active recreation, the most popular types of exercise are jogging (33 per cent) and tai chi, yoga or stretching (34 per cent). Only around 15 per cent of respondents play any type of ball sport, with basketball being the most popular (9 per cent).

As a relatively small proportion of the population plays ball sports, the government should consider putting ball courts in indoor sports centres, on rooftops, or underground to free up more open space for broader public use. Open space managers should also promote alternative uses of ball courts when they are not in use.

WHAT PEOPLE WANT: CYCLING, JOGGING, LAWNS, AND SHADE

When asked to choose the three amenities they would most like to have in their communities, nearly half of all respondents picked shared cycling and jogging paths as well as more lawns, shade, and places to sit and chat as their top choices. Priorities vary among districts: for example, 57 per cent of respondents in Yau Tsim Mong want shared jogging and cycling paths versus only 38 per cent of respondents in Sha Tin.

Parents, the elderly and their family, and people under 30 with no children were additionally given separate sets of choices and asked to choose the top three things they most wanted to improve open spaces for children, the elderly, and youth, respectively.

PARENTS: INTERACTIVE AND ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS

Three quarters of parents demanded space for their children to ride bicycles and scooters. About half asked for interactive natural environments and adventure playgrounds. In both the survey and focus group discussions, parents strongly supported giving children more opportunities to play in nature and making playgrounds more exciting and challenging.

ELDERLY: SAFETY AND COMFORT

Among the elderly respondents, 58 per cent wanted better safety features such as handrails and non-slip paving, while 55 per cent asked for more places to sit and multi-purpose exercise space for tai chi and other activities. These choices show that the elderly prioritize safety and comfort and prefer unstructured open space for exercise. Surprisingly, having more elder-friendly exercise equipment was not a high priority for them, with this option chosen by 47 per cent and coming in 4th out of six.

YOUTH: PHOTOGENIC AND COMFORTABLE HANG-OUT SPACES

About 57 per cent of the young respondents wanted more barbecue areas and 52 per cent asked for multi-purpose exercise spaces. Nearly half supported areas for movie screenings, cultural performances, and skateboarding. In focus group discussions, they reported mostly using open spaces for exercise. They perceived parks, especially small sitting-out areas, as primarily catering to the elderly and expressed a desire for photogenic and comfortable places to hang out with friends without having to spend money at cafés or shopping malls.

PEOPLE ARE MODERATELY SATISFIED

Respondents are moderately satisfied with the quality of open space in their communities, giving a median score of 6 out of 10 for most aspects such as quantity, greening, activities, and facilities. People living in private individual buildings are, however, less satisfied with every aspect of open space compared to those living in other types of housing.

Residents in Wan Chai, Yau Tsim Mong, Central and Western, and Kwai Tsing are significantly less satisfied than the norm. Sha Tin, Tai Po, Islands, and Southern residents are among the most satisfied. This shows that residents in older urban areas have poorer perceptions of the quality of open spaces in their districts compared to those living in more recently developed districts and new towns. Several aspects such as quantity, beauty, and trees, plants and landscaping scored the biggest differences between districts (see Chapter 6).

Overall, residents living in districts with less open space per capita are less satisfied than those living in districts with more open space. Some districts like Yuen Long and Tuen Mun buck this trend however, suggesting that quality, not just quantity, affects satisfaction levels.

OPEN SPACE AND HAPPINESS

The survey found a small but statistically significant positive relationship between the frequency of open space visits and “happiness”. In other words, respondents who visited open space more frequently reported feeling happy more in the two weeks preceding the survey. More research is needed, however, to determine which way the causality runs – whether open space makes people feel happier or people who are happier to begin with visit open space more.

A companion study by Jeffrey Chow analysing the same survey data using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) also found that respondents who live closer to parks and small public open spaces felt less worried. Living close to open spaces may therefore provide some mental-health benefits in reducing stress and improving mood.

CREATIVE STRATEGIES NEEDED TO MEET VARYING NEEDS

Respondents were presented with nine activities frequently banned in open spaces throughout Hong Kong and asked which of these activities they thought could be feasibly allowed in most open spaces.

Their responses revealed major differences among different age groups on how open spaces should be regulated. Around three quarters of the young respondents picked at least one activity that they believed should be allowed, while only around 30 per cent of the elderly did. For example, nearly 40 per cent of 16 to 29-year-olds thought that walking dogs should be allowed in most open spaces, but just 12 per cent of people aged 60 and above agreed. Differences between districts on dog-walking were minor – only Yuen Long and Kowloon City were significantly less welcoming of dogs in open spaces than the norm.

In focus group discussions, some participants of all ages felt that different activities should take place in designated facilities to prevent accidents and conflicts. Elderly participants were especially worried about injury or arguments with others, while the young participants were less likely to perceive activities such as playing with remote-controlled cars as dangerous. Many felt that existing facilities were insufficient and wanted more.

These differences pose challenges for open space providers: people want more activities to be available but also to separate potentially conflicting activities. Creative strategies should be devised to meet varying needs.

OPEN SPACE PLANNING AND DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

- Open space design guidelines should be created to cater for the needs of different generations and encourage inclusive usage. This should include strategies for planning around and dealing with potentially conflicting activities.
- Consider incorporating shared cycling and jogging paths into larger open spaces, increasing the number of trees and seasonal shade sails to provide shade especially for the elderly and children, and adding more lawns to meet public aspirations.
- Conduct community-wide consultations on open space design and planning in each district to serve the different needs and preferences of residents. Engagement on a district level will help residents reach compromises regarding potentially conflicting priorities, for example whether to allow dogs or cycling in open space (please see full report for detailed district findings).
- Pilot alternative open space management strategies. Certain locations can be selected to experiment with more flexible open space regulations. This would allow those who want to enjoy more activities, such as cycling and walking dogs, the opportunity to do so while allowing others to avoid such activities.

- Tailor-made guidelines are needed for different types of open space to promote diversity in open space design.
- Revitalize open spaces in old urban areas where the housing stock consists primarily of private individual buildings, where open space facilities are few and small. Residents are measurably less satisfied with the quality of open spaces in these areas, but their potential can be maximized by including high-quality landscaping with plentiful seating to encourage social interaction. Such open spaces can also be better integrated with the surrounding streetscape by removing walls and fences.
- Improve access to the waterfront in districts such as Kwun Tong, Wan Chai, and Tsuen Wan by enhancing pedestrian connections and providing better wayfinding.
- Most people are able to easily access some type of open spaces, but they do not necessarily have easy access to high-quality or larger open spaces. While it is difficult to change existing built-up areas, the Planning Department should, for future planning purposes, set specific walking distance targets (that is, a catchment radius) for district open spaces, such as medium and larger parks. Currently, there are only walking distance targets for local open spaces. To measure progress, the Planning Department should also collect statistics on what percentage of residents in each district live within walking distance of different categories of open spaces.