

**For the Community,
by the Community**

Public Engagement for Singapore's Parks

For a small city-state, the government had set a bold target of providing 0.8 hectares of green space per 1,000 people. Singapore already had some 400 parks across the country. Numerous parks were due for rejuvenation in the coming years, while new ones were in the works. The National Parks Board (NParks), Singapore's public agency for greenery, was faced with a challenge – **how could these green spaces better meet the public's needs?**

Friends of the Park initiative

In the past, NParks typically conceptualised park designs based on its internal assessment of park user needs, and then sought public feedback on these preliminary designs through public exhibitions. Separately, NParks worked with volunteers to promote responsible use of parks and organise activities such as guided tours. With calls for greater community stewardship of Singapore's parks in recent years, NParks launched the Friends of the Parks (FotP) initiative in 2016.

The philosophy behind the FotP was to have local communities of volunteers and stakeholders within a park's ecosystem play a key role in promoting active and responsible use of parks. This philosophy was extended to NParks' approach to developing and managing new and existing parks. By attracting and building a community around the parks, NParks reasoned that there would be a greater sense of collective responsibility and more harmonious usage of these shared spaces.

[W]e want to get more Singaporeans involved, as part of our Singapore Together movement – where we engage and involve Singaporeans in shaping our city and building our nation, including implementing our parks. We want you to have a greater say in the way we design and implement these green spaces by bringing you on board early.¹

Lawrence Wong

Minister for National
Development (2020)



¹ Opening Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong at the Launch of Pasir Panjang Park Engagement", Ministry of National Development, January 18, 2020, <https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/view/opening-remarks-by-minister-lawrence-wong-at-the-launch-of-pasir-panjang-park-engagement>

² Leong Chee Chiew (National Parks Board), interview by Jean Chia, February 1, 2023.

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NParks also sought to engage a wider range of stakeholders than before. By doing so, different users and stakeholder groups would gain a deeper understanding of the trade-offs that might be necessary among competing needs and wants, and even help bridge such tensions. Ultimately, parks would be co-created by the community for the community. Dr Leong Chee Chiew, NParks' Commissioner of Parks and Recreation explained:

What we have learnt is that we need conversations to take place among the users and interest groups. Because it is only through bringing these groups together and letting them have conversations with each other, that they come to understand that their views about how the space should be used is not the only one that stands... and find ways to give and take, to co-exist.²

Pasir Panjang Park, which will be opened in phases, was the first to adopt this new engagement approach in 2020, alongside three other upcoming or existing parks (see table below). NParks also roped in the Civil Service College (CSC) to advise on a more structured design and engagement approach for the four parks. It aimed to implement the new engagement approach for up to 50 parks by 2025.



Parks under pilot design and engagement approach

Park	Size	Park Type	Park Profile
Pasir Panjang Park	2.65km, 6.05ha	New (regional park)	2.65km linear park of 6.05ha in Pasir Panjang with maritime heritage; first phase opened to public Sep 2021.
Tampines Boulevard Park	10ha	New (town park)	10ha located in Tampines North; flanked by upcoming public housing developments.
Villa Verde Park Extension	160m, 1.3ha	Existing (neighbourhood park)	1.3ha park spanning 160m located next to a private housing estate in Yew Tee; would double size of existing Villa Verde Park.
Punggol Heritage Trail	1.3km, 5.7ha	New (town park)	Pedestrianised 1.3km trail covering 5.7ha along old Punggol Road; would run through upcoming Punggol Digital District.

(For comparison, 1 football field is around 0.8ha.)

Ensuring broad representation of stakeholders

NParks and CSC had to first figure out who to engage. They identified three broad categories of stakeholders – users, contributors, and champions – to ensure that the engagements captured a representative sample of different types of stakeholders. Within each stakeholder category, participants who were more influential were prioritised because they could help to mobilise support downstream for future park-related initiatives.

Users

People who may be future park users and/or directly impacted by the development of the park. These may include:

- Residents, both in neighbouring private/HDB estates
- Employees in nearby offices
- Users in adjacent amenities (e.g. nearby hawker centres)

Contributors

Have a defined interest or stake in the park design, development and management. These may include:

- Interest groups
- Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)
- Non-Governmental/Non-Profit Organisations (NGOs/NPOs)
- Grassroots Organisations (GROs)/Private Residence Management Corporation Strata Titles (MCSTs)
- Government agencies (e.g. PSA Singapore, People's Association, National Heritage Board etc.)

Champions

Deemed by NParks to be valued partners. These individuals are active in parks design, development and management, and are representative members NParks wishes to see in the FotP initiatives.

Another consideration was matching relevant contributors to the profile of the parks. Wayne Gui, NParks' Director of Education & Engagement, elaborated on Pasir Panjang Park:

We talk about Pasir Panjang Park being nature-based, obviously we have to involve the nature groups as well. And then we also have some influence by [port operator] PSA that Pasir Panjang Park should uphold some of the port heritage. And this is where we also prioritise the heritage groups to come in. And we know that the people who will be working around the area will use the park to go to the MRT, or to go to the [nearby] hawker centre. Then, that is where we also think that the hawker association should be involved and even [public transport operator] SMRT as well.³



The CSC team also encouraged the inclusion of interest groups with strong views to ensure that there was a genuine diversity of views and debate – despite NParks' initial concerns about the difficulty of managing their expectations. It turned out to be less trying than NParks had feared. What helped was laying out the objectives and parameters of the engagement clearly at the start, reinforcing them during the sessions, and closing the feedback loop by informing participants how the feedback gathered would be used. Stakeholders, by and large, appreciated NParks' candour about physical or budgetary constraints for some of their ideas.

Size mattered in deciding the scale of engagement. Larger parks like Pasir Panjang Park and Punggol Heritage Trail were expected to have a larger catchment of park users and stakeholders, and hence more engagement participants. In comparison, the engagements for Villa Verde Park Extension, a neighbourhood park, were smaller in scale. The engagements for the four parks eventually reached out to more than 900 people over an 18-month period between 2020 and 2021.



Leveraging networks to secure participation

For contributors like nature groups, NParks tapped on its existing networks built through past interactions. For example, interest groups like Nature Society Singapore, Butterfly Circle and OtterWatch were involved in the engagements for Pasir Panjang Park. Given the potential to showcase the park's maritime heritage, interest groups like Singapore Heritage Society and port operator, PSA Singapore, were also included.

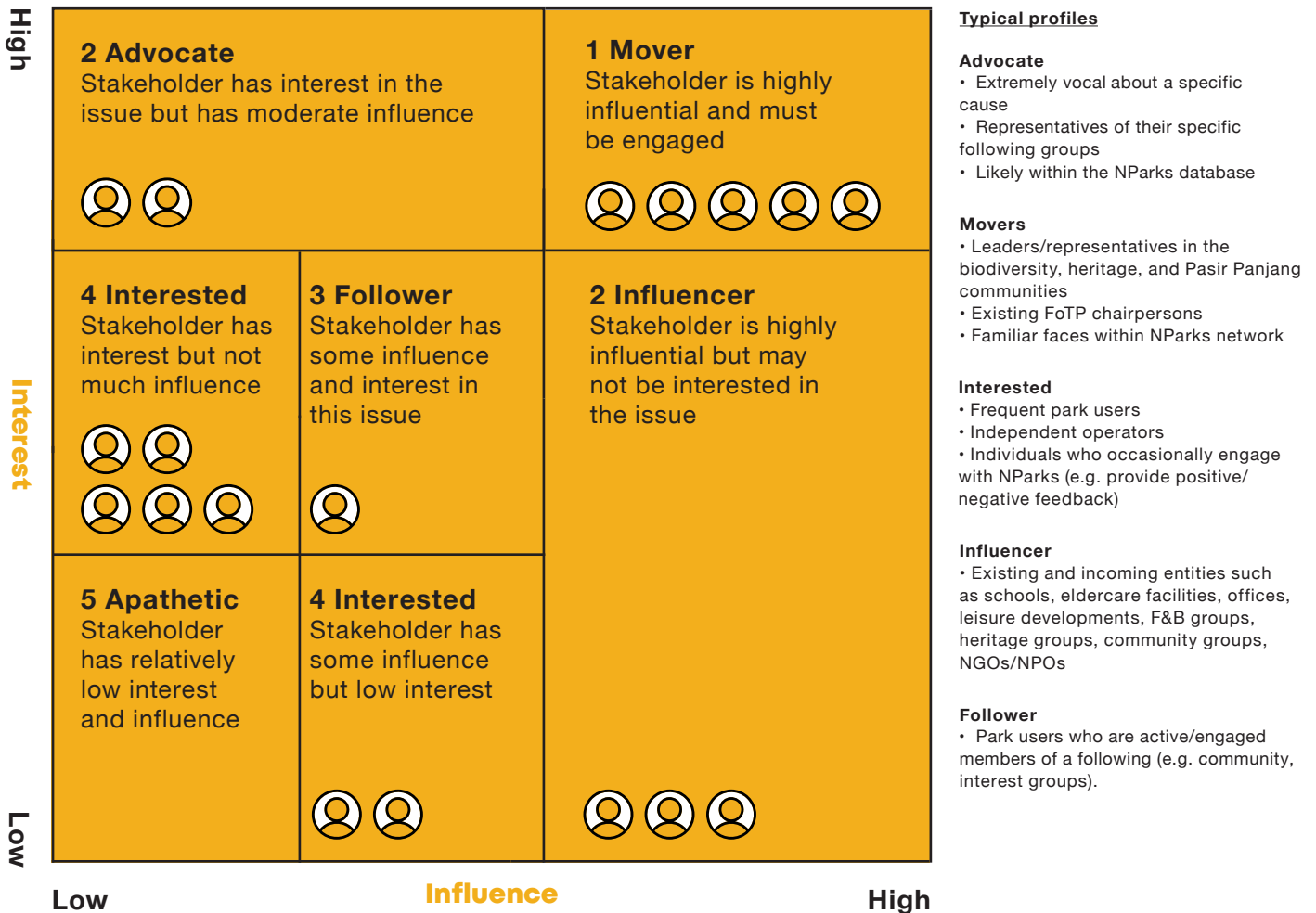
Identifying and recruiting individuals representative of park users was more difficult and time-consuming. NParks and CSC tapped existing communities and grassroots networks. To reach out to residents and business owners in the areas surrounding Pasir Panjang Park, NParks worked with GROs such as Telok Blangah Residents' Committees, Pasir Panjang East Association Neighbourhood Committee, and Hawkers' Association. NParks also took efforts to include less obvious park users, such as residents of a nearby nursing home. In the case of Villa Verde Park Extension, NParks connected directly with an existing community of long-time close-knit Villa Verde residents, who frequented the park.

NParks also leveraged social media networks. It worked with a grassroots adviser to Tampines constituency to publicise an online poll for the new Tampines Boulevard Park through his social media accounts, in addition to emailing future residents of upcoming public housing developments in the vicinity.

Prioritising based on interest and influence

Participants were sorted into five groups using the Stakeholder Mapping and Prioritisation Framework – movers, advocates, influencers, followers, and interested. NParks and CSC did a preliminary assessment of their levels of interest in the parks and influence within their stakeholder groups, and used a series of screening questions to gauge their interest areas or determine the groups that they were representing. These categorisations were refined over the course of the engagement sessions.

This exercise helped NParks gain a better understanding of how willing the participants were to work with it, collaborate with others, or lead initiatives related to the parks. Those assessed as having both high interest and influence were potential champions who could form the core of future FotPs, especially for subsequent park development and management phases. If NParks had opted only for large-scale quantitative engagement modes such as online surveys, it would have been far harder to identify and engage such individuals.



Interest	Low Does not mind learning more about the issue Mid Has moderate stake in the initiative/user is impacted by issue High At the frontline fighting for the issue/initiative
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Influence	Limited to their close circle of friends and family Beyond close circle, also part of an interest group/significant entity Representing the interest/entity
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Uncovering park users' needs

In the initial phase, the engagement objective was to uncover park users' needs. For instance, some 60 participants at the first engagement session for Pasir Panjang Park were divided into small groups to discuss topics such as how the park should look like and how maritime artefacts could be incorporated. The findings from this session helped NParks and CSC establish a common set of user needs for all four parks.

Each small group had a deliberate mix of participants from all three stakeholder categories. This arrangement helped to bridge tensions by allowing them to hear and debate different perspectives, rather than being overly focused on a single interest or issue. Jessica Lee who was in the CSC team, shared:

All the sessions were very deliberately designed to bring users into the same room, to have discussions, to share ideas, [and] to respectfully deny each other's ideas as well... the unintended good consequence was that then NParks got to listen for themselves [and] maybe challenge their previous thinking about how park design should be.⁴



Photo courtesy of NParks

CSC conducted interviews to dig deeper into the experiences, motivations and even unspoken needs of the three stakeholder groups. These interviews could also yield connections to other stakeholders. For instance, an interview with a fishing enthusiast led NParks and CSC to connect with a community who frequented the parks for fishing. Chew Yun Jin who was a member of the CSC team, explained:

The reason why we employed one-to-one interviews [was] to get a deeper sense and to have a more intimate setting where we can actually probe the users about their park usages... we go quite fairly in-depth into their behavioural patterns... asking questions like: "Who do you frequent the park with? Is it with your children?" ... And then that can lead us to fairly deep insight on how the projected park usage might be.⁵

Institutional stakeholders comprising different sub-segments of people often required a mix of engagement methods. For example, the engagement for Punggol Heritage Trail involved Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). The participants were sub-divided into students, staff and management. One-to-one interviews were conducted with the management to understand how collaboration with NParks could dovetail with SIT's strategic priorities. Focus group discussions were conducted with other SIT staff and students to uncover their user needs.



⁴ Jessica PP Lee (Civil Service College), interview by Jean Chia, January 25, 2023.

⁵ Chew Yun Jin (Civil Service College), interview by Jean Chia, January 25, 2023.

Figuring out priorities and generating ideas

Many of the user needs uncovered were similar across the four parks. This included safety and security, accessibility, and preference for naturalistic features. NParks and CSC needed to figure out which user needs would make greater impact to the park experience and should be prioritised.

Online polling was a straightforward method to prioritise users' needs and design features proposed in an earlier phase. This method worked for Tampines Boulevard Park because the potential park users, such as families living in the nearby public housing developments, had a relatively homogeneous profile and user needs were expected to converge. The survey received more than 600 responses.

NParks and CSC also engaged small groups of stakeholders to brainstorm ideas for park features and programmes based on users' priorities. For Pasir Panjang Park, NParks and CSC held an online focus group discussion with stakeholders, such as youths from the nearby National University of Singapore and residents from Pasir Panjang East Association, to generate ideas and gather feedback on shortlisted ideas. Prototypes such as park user's journey maps and mock-ups of future park spaces were also developed and tested with another group of potential park users.

Managing engagement challenges

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 introduced complications to the engagement process. When focus group discussions had to be moved online, some participants were unfamiliar with or hesitant to use virtual platforms. NParks and CSC had to provide additional technical support and alternative avenues for collecting feedback such as simplified online surveys. Building rapport was also harder and required adjustments. For example, online engagements sessions were redesigned to include more purposeful group activities, rather than be solely conversation-driven, to encourage more participant contribution.

Another risk was engagement fatigue, especially for participants from interest groups involved in multiple engagements. Zhou Boyi, NParks' Senior Assistant Director for Strategic Planning who was involved in several FotP initiatives, explained how NParks sustained participants' motivations by cultivating a sense of ownership:

You need people to have a vested stake in this... and show them that they contributed ideas that have shaped the park. When they suggest ideas, it is important to take them seriously and see how [NParks] can facilitate and partner them on these initiatives. When they can see that their ideas come to fruition, it then motivates them to continue partnering NParks.⁶

NParks' commitment to revamp its approach to park design and development, and willingness to test various engagement approaches, have helped it create better parks and more meaningful experiences for users. Feedback from participants of these engagements has been positive, with an overwhelming majority indicating their readiness to partner NParks in co-creating future parks.



⁶ Zhou Boyi (National Parks Board), interview by Jean Chia, February 1, 2023.