

Parks for People Case Study: Sconce and Devon Park, Newark

This report summarises our findings from Sconce and Devon Park in Newark. The case study has been produced following a site visit with the project manager and a review of the project's initial application form and monitoring data. The purpose of the case study is;

- To provide evidence of impact and progress towards the programme outcomes
- To explore what difference the Parks for People funding has had on the park and surrounding community
- To highlight examples of good practice

Introduction

Sconce and Devon Park is the largest area of public greenspace in Newark. It is a large 12ha site and is situated 1km from the town centre. The park was created in a piecemeal fashion since the late nineteenth century and can be divided into 4 character areas; the Sconce Hills, the Queen's Sconce, Devon Pastures Nature Reserve and Devon Park.

Devon & Sconce Park is not a traditional, designed landscape like many urban parks but rather an open space that has been added to over time. It does have heritage value but much of this is in its historical and cultural context rather than built heritage. That said, it does contain the Queen's Sconce, an earth bank fortification dating back to the civil war.

The project aimed to enhance the appearance and accessibility of the park, encourage and involve more users, conserve and improve an internationally important heritage feature, provide educational, training, volunteering and employment opportunities and improve the standards of management and maintenance.

The park was awarded £1.2m of HLF funding and the capital works are now completed.

Outcome 1: increasing the range of audiences

Prior to the project the park recorded 206,000 annual person visits. There were slightly more female (53%) than male visitors, 98% were White British and 6% disabled. The project aimed to increase overall visitor numbers slightly to 220,000, to increase BME visitors to 7%, over 60s from 15% to 25% and 30-59 year olds from 35% to 40% in order to match the profile of the local population. The project uses gate counters and a car counter and supplements this with visitor observational studies and GreenStat surveys.

The project was aimed at a range of audiences, from local people (families, children and young people and elderly people), those from disadvantaged backgrounds (one of the most deprived wards in the district is located within close walking distance of the park) and tourists (through links with other heritage tourism attractions in the area).

The Audience Development Plan aimed to deliver a range of activities and events;

- Environmental and heritage education for local children and schools

- Guided heritage and environmental walks for families, tourists, specialist groups and elderly people
- Wildlife surveys and recording for schools and volunteers
- An angling inclusion project for young people excluded from education or at risk
- Archaeology /heritage projects with young people and specialist groups
- Public events, including an annual festival

The plan has been largely delivered through a small events programme which has supplemented a previous annual festival organised by the Friends. These events follow guidance in the ADP and target the missing audiences – mainly families and older people. Communication has been via information placed in the park, on the Council website and some press releases. A guidebook about the history of the park is currently in production.

Having a ranger employed early on in the project has enabled them to develop events and activities as the delivery of the works has progressed. Interpretation panels, branded with child-friendly characters based on the shape of the sconce, have been installed at key points around the park, and an education pack has been produced and the ranger meets with school heads / assistant heads to discuss what the park can offer.

The project has achieved its target of increasing visitor numbers, with 221,000 recorded. They have also achieved their target of increasing BME visitors, with 6% recorded in the last survey. However, they have not yet seen a change in the number of over 60s or 30-59 year olds, as the largest age group visiting the park is still younger people. This increased audience has also seen satisfaction rates increase from 72% to 87%.

Outcome 2: Conserving and improving the heritage value

The restoration works resulted in;

- 1 historic feature repaired/restored
- 75% of the park has benefited from horticultural improvements
- 90% of the park has benefited from infrastructure improvements
- Habitat protection, species protection and biological recordings and surveys

The sconce was in a very poor state and within a poor landscape setting. The project saw trees, scrub and brambles cleared from its banks and the surrounding land and a bridge across onto its top. Due to the significance of the sconce and the surrounding area's connection to the Civil War, whenever any digging was done in the park there was an archaeologist present.

The history and heritage of the site has been recorded (and used in interpretive materials) and this has influenced the management and maintenance of the site. The council has always been aware of the history of the site but the recent project work has helped interpret it for the local community; new interpretation signage in café and around the park relates the history and significance of the park. A bridge across onto sconce has made this heritage feature more accessible. The council and Friends website carries information on the history of the site and its social context.

Anecdotal feedback from people the ranger has met shows there's also a feeling of civic pride in the town for the park and what it is achieving. The improvements have meant that the scone is easier to maintain and keep in an acceptable condition. A bank mower has been purchased by the council specifically for this task. Anti-social behaviour has continued to decline – a combination of greater ownership of the site by the Friends and the local community, CCTV cover, on-site staff presence and closer work with the police through the project.

Outcome 3: Increasing the range of volunteers

The park had a well established Friends group and before the project started there were 75 volunteers involved. There were slightly more female than male volunteers, 93% were White British and 6% disabled. Most of the volunteers were involved in maintenance and horticulture sides of the park. Although already having a decent number of volunteers the project wanted to increase its overall volunteers to 90, to have a 50/50 male/female split and to increase disabled volunteers to 10%. They also wanted to involve more volunteers in running one-off events.

In practice, high levels of local awareness of the project and its aims has meant that the council has had no need to undertake any promotional work to get groups involved in maintaining and enhancing the park. Volunteering opportunities have meant that groups with learning difficulties (from Mencap and a local sheltered housing), students from a local special school and patients from a low secure unit regularly work on-site. A one-off project to improve the river bank has seen involvement by disabled canoeists from the nearby marina.

Feedback is one area that the council admits it needs to greatly improve upon. There are no formal systems in place to get feedback from volunteers, people attending events etc.

Having the ranger has meant that local voluntary and community groups can now get involved with the park. The restoration work done through the capital works combined with the demand for volunteer opportunities means that the ranger is just about at capacity with volunteers for practical projects in the park. There is a danger that, without additional fundraising, they could run out of new projects for volunteers to get involved with. As a result of this the council has taken on an additional patch of land adjacent to the park and are currently using volunteers to help conserve and enhance it.

The high level of demand for volunteering has seen the ranger coordinate opportunities with other projects in the local area and so the project is bringing wider social and community benefits. With such a small BME population and current demands on the ranger's time for the existing volunteers, the ranger is struggling to find the necessary time to engage with people within these communities and involve them in the volunteering.

Awareness of the project in the local community and the opportunities brought by the provision of a ranger and a venue with facilities for volunteers has meant that the site which previously had little or no volunteers (other than the friends group and their activities) now has volunteers involved in tasks nearly every day.

The number of volunteers has increased from 75 to 82 so far, with 1,663 hours of volunteer time recorded. There are now more male volunteers than female.

Outcome 4: Improving skills and knowledge through training

Before the project started, there were small numbers of both trained staff and volunteers (5 of each). The project aimed to increase staff trained to 9, volunteers trained to 10, introduce 1 work placement, achieve 2 qualifications and encourage 2 third party organisations to use the park as a training venue.

The delivery of the training plan is behind schedule but it is not impacting on the wider project delivery timetable. Core training elements have been undertaken by staff e.g. inspection and operational maintenance training, and there is now more focus on those training opportunities that bring added value to the project. Training has been split between stakeholders (development of the training plan involved an assessment of more than just staff and volunteers but also other groups that could help deliver the project) and volunteers.

The café was set up as a social enterprise and the company employ local people who have learning difficulties. Other links with Mencap mean that the project is providing invaluable training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

So far the project has trained 8 staff and 8 volunteers, created 1 work experience placement and achieved 2 qualifications. 3 third parties have used the park as a training venue.

Outcome 5: Improving management and maintenance

The park had achieved Green Flag status prior to the project. It has continued to achieve this award during the project's delivery and aims to achieve a score of 75-79.

Having so many volunteers has meant that the park is ahead of its predicted management and maintenance actions and the council is able to manage additional land as a public resource.

A key part of the project is the employment of a full-time site-based park ranger, a role which will be vital to attracting more and different people to the park, offering a wider range of opportunities and improving maintenance standards. There are regular meetings involving council staff which review progress and use the Green Flag judges' feedback to programme in any changes.

Conclusions

This case study is able to demonstrate examples of good practice through:

- Delivering a range of events for different types of visitors
- Carrying out research on the history of the site and disseminating this through websites, leaflets and interpretive materials
- Employing a park ranger to work with volunteers and voluntary organisations
- Creating links with voluntary organisations to ensure disadvantaged groups benefit from training opportunities



Figure 1 - picture taken before work



Figure 2 - picture taken after work