
Promoting Green Space in Stoke-on-Trent (ProGreSS)

Final report for Natural England
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BACKGROUND

Recent work has highlighted the public health importance of **local** and **neighbourhood** (or *doorstep*) green space in **deprived urban** areas; those areas in which health and social need are often greatest, but where green space tends to be poor quality and under-used.¹⁻³

Nature Nearby reaffirmed this recognition that *doorstep* green space, which has the most potential for influencing behaviour, must be both accessible and of sufficient quality.²

*'... the availability of small green spaces on the doorstep are of crucial importance, especially for less mobile people and young children.'*⁴ (p.113)

Local parks and green spaces in deprived urban communities often typify the area; compared with more affluent areas, a deprived neglected area is likely to have poorly maintained green space with inadequate facilities that deter use, promote anti-social behaviour and perpetuate negative perceptions.⁵ Despite this, people tend to value their local parks, vindicating efforts to make the most of this potential health and social resource.

PROJECT AIMS

The 18-month Promoting Green Space in Stoke-on-Trent (ProGreSS) project used a

partnership approach to effect sustainable improvements to *doorstep* green space in a deprived urban community on a modest budget.

*'People living in deprived urban areas recognise and appreciate the value of local green spaces, but they underuse the spaces that are most convenient because these spaces are often poor quality and feel unsafe.'*¹ (p.2)

Staffordshire University (SU) researchers and Groundwork Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire (GW) were the principal project partners, but worked closely with the City Council (Area Implementation Team, Youth Services), Police, local schools and residents.

The success of this partnership approach was demonstrated through leveraging in further funds that **increased the original budget by 75%**. These contributions in-kind from local partners and additional funds secured through GW were necessary to implement interventions that might have a sustainable impact.

STUDY DESIGN

A 12-month intervention programme was informed by baseline data and ongoing community consultation surrounding a 4.6 hectare neighbourhood park in Stoke-on-Trent.

A four-part pre-post evaluation involved collection of qualitative and quantitative data

from residents within a 300m walk of the park:² postal survey; focus groups and interviews with local adults, youth and stakeholders; direct observation of park use; audit of green space quality.*

Key issues identified at baseline:

- Consistent with the literature, residents valued, but were largely dissatisfied with, their local green space, often opting to drive to larger sites for recreation activities.

"[after dark] when you get the gangs gathering, you wouldn't want to walk through...it's intimidating" (Adult resident)

- Major barriers to use were perceived antisocial behaviour by local youth, largely attributed to boredom through a lack of adequate local facilities and activities; lack of facilities for younger children to attract parents and young children.

"There's not really anywhere for the children to play, no swings, no play area" (Adult resident)

- Local youth, however, felt somewhat victimised by these perception and unfairly blamed for misuse of the area. They also expressed a sense of ownership:

"[Park name] is our park... isn't a very family park" (Local teenager)

*Direct observations and audit protocols/tools were developed and piloted for use in local or neighbourhood urban green space.

- Observations revealed that the majority of visitors, many of whom were children and young people walking to/from school, used the park for access rather than a place to visit for recreation. Aside from dog walkers, just a small number of teenagers used the site for socialising and football.

"It's just a certain people's park really, it's not like people come down, it's just like people who are always there" (Local teenager)

INTERVENTION

The programme of consultation, organised activities and physical site improvements formed part of a larger effort to tackle antisocial behaviour in the area that involved Police, the City Council AIT, Youth Services, and some residents.

A combination of site improvements and organised youth and children/parent activities (delivered by GW, Youth Services and Stoke City FC) were implemented between July 2009 and May 2010:

- Youth football to offer constructive activities/coaching and engagement opportunities on Friday evenings (identified as a problem period)
- Child and parent play sessions to attract young children and families into the space
- Natural play area introduced to address the expressed lack of facilities for play

- Dense coppice was opened up and thinned to improve visibility (alleviate safety concerns) and further contribute towards an increase in site quality (to improve perceptions and use).



Project launch event (July 2009)

FINDINGS

Data collected at follow-up (June/July 2010) suggested some improvement in community perceptions of the park (Figure 1), reflecting the increase in *quality* (audit), but apparently not manifesting in changes in use at the time of follow-up data collection (observation data).

In time, however, such improvements in perceptions could lead to the park becoming more of a community recreation space, in turn representing a health promoting neighbourhood asset.⁶

“...the natural play area here... what this has done as well, it’s attracted, definitely in my eyes a good group of children here” (Police)

Opening up the wooded area to improve visibility was well received, with some evidence that the natural play area was starting to prove beneficial:

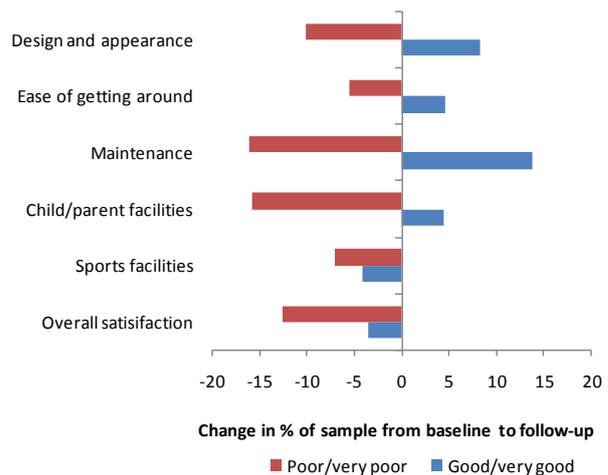


Figure 1. Difference between baseline and follow-up in the % rating park as poor/very poor and good/very good

A concurrent reduction in reported antisocial behaviour in the neighbourhood area was more pronounced in the park during the period of the project. Although this cannot be attributed directly the project activities, as part of a larger coordinated effort by a number of partners, the project was recognised by stakeholders (Police, GW, local resident; Box 1) as an important contributor.

*“We’re getting so few calls [reporting antisocial behaviour] here at the moment... I would say we’ve had none in the last couple of months... it does show the difference”
(Police)*

Box 1 summarises an example of the substantial individual difference for residents who were proactive and embraced the project.

“... what they ought to do is get these kids together, and I don’t mind a bit of input... I’d enjoy it.” (Adult resident)

Other residents of a follow-up focus group, encouraged by ProGreSS activities, also expressed a greater willingness to get involved in such community efforts than evident at baseline.



New path and features in coppice

CHALLENGES

The neighbourhood and park area were challenging environments for community engagement. This was not only experienced directly by the research team, but confirmed through interviews and focus groups with local residents, Police and GW community workers.

“I’ve sort of given up on ‘em... It’s like the neighbourhood meetings; they were coming, moaning and not prepared to do anything about it.” (Local resident)

Low social capital remains a key barrier to community involvement with such projects, despite residents identifying the need.

“The ones that said they would become involved, but we know later on that they didn’t”. (Groundwork)

SUSTAINABILITY

The challenges resulted in some compromises, such as greater resources used for consultation thus negating the inclusion of a control site for comparison. However, notable project successes (e.g., Box 1) and establishing an important network of local partners signified the start of a process. The project has also raised the profile, and provided valuable evidence of, the need for further investment in the area.

“We gave people a voice... and to be heard... and we’ve taken it seriously.” (Groundwork)

The project has also demonstrated that through collaborative working, a relatively small investment can make a difference. Through its location as a central congregating point for children and youth from a number of areas, the park represents an ideal opportunity and location to increase ongoing engagement activities (e.g., by Youth Services) and for further site improvements (e.g., more equipment for younger and older children). Additional activities initiated outside of the key project tasks to promote improvements beyond the project included:

- Facilitating meetings between Youth Forum and local adults to promote inter-generational dialogue
- Proactive residents subsequently attending local Youth groups

- Continued efforts by GW to fund further child/youth activities
- Evidence from the project used to make a case for further lighting on existing park facilities (in 2011)
- Finally, the evidence gathered will be summarised to outline the case for further investment; the *lasting value* of this work in starting the process and raising the profile of need should become more apparent over time.



Natural play area (July 2010)

CONCLUSION

Fear associated with antisocial behaviour (perceived and real) was the major barrier to use of this small neighbourhood park. Such a longstanding social issue could not be solved through a small-scale green space intervention. The project did, however, raise the profile of a need for, and formed part of, a multi-agency effort to tackle this problem, through providing valuable evidence, improving site quality and putting on activities for children/parents and young people.

The 12-month intervention, informed by extensive baseline data collection and ongoing community consultation, was

generally well received, with concurrent improvement in park perceptions and a reduction in antisocial behaviour.

Had time allowed, repeated follow-up at a later date could explore whether apparent improvement in perceptions and the reduction in antisocial behaviour do manifest in more recreational use by a broader cross-section of the local community, including families and children.

The ability to secure further funding (almost doubling the original budget) and collaborative working towards a common goal demonstrated the added value of the partnership approach. Although this can make it difficult to establish the specific effects of different activities, the multi-faceted evaluation also helped to make the case for action and monitored subsequent change.

Box 1. Case study of local resident Ann (*pseudonym*), 71 years old

Ann was involved with the project from the outset and, as a result, became proactive in trying to improve the situation with local youth. The park was initially seen as the source of distress for some local residents (through perceived antisocial behaviour), but Ann now recognises it as part of the solution.

“Those fields need to be for everybody, good, bad or indifferent. Let’s get em on that field. If they’re on that field, they’re not up and down the street are they?”

Through her involvement, Ann was aware of the coordinated effort to tackle antisocial behaviour in the park and the role of the project in highlighting the problems during consultation.

“You’ve had the base and you’ve opened all avenues for other things to go on, which was needed... without you I don’t think any of this would have gone off.”

Discussions during project consultation and intervention planning produced a change in Ann’s attitude and behaviour towards local youth: **“it was a case of them and us, but then I thought no you’ve got to start talking to them.”**

*“About 3 months after you started talking to us... I went out to these teenagers, talking to them. And from then on it sort of broke all barriers. **It really did bring the barriers down** and I was ever so pleased.”*

Ann has since taken further action, visiting the mobile youth club in the park to engage with the local youth each week, and has since made plans to volunteer at the local youth group. Ann has continued to be an advocate of the project and concurrent activities by Youth Services because she has noticed a reduction in the antisocial behaviour:

*“I’m not sitting here, watching my window in case they come throw eggs at me. I haven’t done that for a good 12 months now since you started all this kicking it all off. I think it’s marvellous and **its made our life a lot better.**”*

This is likely to be a combination of *real* changes through the efforts of the Youth Services, the Police and Groundwork, but also the change in Ann’s perceptions from breaking down the barriers and fear of young people through engaging with them. Consequently, and following the physical site improvements as part of the project, Ann and her husband now visit the park for the first time in years.

“Me and [husband], I said shall we go and walk across the park... it was lovely, grass had been mowed and he says “this is how it used to be”. It used to be a lovely park... now he hadn’t been across there for 12 years, neither of us had.”

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