

## Changing User Demands in City Parks and Gardens

**The Mersey Forest** is a growing network of woodlands, parks and green spaces spread across Cheshire and Merseyside, England covering over 1300sq km, which has been creating woodlands and quality green space since 1994.

The Forest is one of the leading environmental regeneration initiatives in North West England with Cheshire West and Chester Council as the lead Local Authority. Through community and partnership working, the Forest has planted more than 8 million trees – equivalent to five new trees for every person living within the Forest area (1.6 million). Praised as a “visionary concept”, our approach brings a whole range of environmental, health and economic benefits to the region.

This has been achieved through our partnership of local authorities, landowners, the Forestry Commission, Natural England and businesses.

The Forest Team’s approach to engaging people in woodland, parks and green space activity, follows a pyramid of participation, with increasing levels of empowerment.

- By raising awareness about places to visit,
- Using sites for education and training,
- Engaging people through events and activities,
- Consulting and involving and inspiring people in improving our green spaces,
- Encouraging and supporting communities to care for their sites long term through community stewardship Supporting those communities and landowners to manage and own their sites.

The Forest Team work to engage people to create, enhance and manage green space across a large range of settings, from parks, community gardens, allotments, school grounds, derelict land.

### Case study; Euclid Park, Warrington – Community Consultation – Natural Play

Was a well managed but uninspiring park, not well used by the local community up to 2010

In October 2010, Grappenhall and Thelwall Parish Council, with the support of local Councillor Mike Biggin and The Mersey Forest secured funding through Parish Council funds, Play Pathfinder Programme and the national Big Tree Plant Project. Following consultation with residents, the aim was to create an inspiring park with natural play features a welcoming entrance with artwork and mosaics, new colourful shrubs, trees and wildflowers, a community orchard with an edible hedge of soft fruit, more seating which could also be used for the children to step along, a nest swing and a large new natural log climbing area. The improvements at Euclid Park were aimed to improve facilities for all ages and aimed to attract more users to the park, with the initial ideas for design of the natural play area from local people at a community day in November 2010 the schools were keen to get involved. The tree and bulb planting was undertaken by Bradshaw Community Primary School, with mosaics design for gates and the entrance

way and artwork by St Wilfred's Primary, further community planting days took place including the orchard and copse planting events which were held in March 2011 and March 2012. The park with its improvements is used now by many more people of all ages, recently, the local history group were involved in a display at the town art gallery and were proud to show how much the park had changed;

*'Thank you so much for taking the trouble to send these pictures through - they were great especially the "before/after" ones showing the wildflower meadow and the log climbs. They look fantastic. Actually I spent a happy hour there today with my grandson, and he loved it as usual. We're very lucky to have it in the locality'* Carolyn Phillips Grappenhall Local History Group

### **Case Study: Marbury and Anderton Nature Park, Cheshire – Managing parks with community Stewardship**

The Friends of Anderton and Marbury were set up in 1998, from a small group of local people keen to get involved in their local park and woodlands.

In partnership with Cheshire County Council (now Cheshire West and Chester Council) and the Mersey Forest Team, the group was encouraged to join a new network of 'Friends Groups'. This network, managed by The Forest Team has provided mentor support, action planning, fundraising and the award of an annual group grant.

14 years on, the group is stronger than ever, with over 150 members and still part of the network. . The group has gained a huge amount of confidence over time and new skills whilst managing the park. Due to high levels of community involvement the rangers now run twice weekly practical task days, and the Friends group run theirs on a monthly basis, The group manages a wide range of projects to improve the park and woodland, which have included the creation of major art and other capital works on site including the Marbury carved archway, visitors shelter, dipping platform, and other management activities such as reed bed restoration, wildflower trials, orchard planting. They have developed good relationships with partners and sponsors including Ineos Chlor Vinyls, and have brought in considerable amounts of funding which could not have been accessed by the local authority. The group has a unique way of managing projects through changing leadership and appointing a project champion within the group who leads it through from start to finish, this approach has been shared with other Friends Groups.

### **Case Study: Mab Lane Community Woodlands - Disadvantaged Groups – New users Forest School; Economic regeneration.**

The Mab Lane Community Woodland is in an area of high deprivation close to central Liverpool, but has benefited from significant capital investment over the past 3 years.

Physical improvement of parks and green space does not always guarantee an automatic increased use from the public. Within urban parks underlying antisocial behaviour which may have been present prior to the changes, can deter local people to use sites and sites may retain a negative reputation long after improvements .Our Access to Nature project encourages people by providing different ways of engaging

with their local green space through a range of targeted activities. The aim is to increase the number and diversity of users making their first steps into their local green spaces and encourage them to continue to use them and develop a sense of ownership.

The Access to Nature Project is a 3 year project funded in The Mersey Forest through Heritage Lottery Fund and Natural England.

Our programme over the first 18 months has included public activities such as fun days and community arts to introduce the sites as well as smaller, more intimate group activities such as guided bike rides and green gym.

Organized activities have been closely monitored. Attendance data over the past 18 months through this project has identified **a minimum 36% re-visit rate by** people whom have visited the sites at least 4 times (at events).

Parks in the northwest of England are increasingly in demand to be used for Forest School (adopted from the Scandinavian model of using the forest for education and as areas of therapeutic learning). With woodland cover still young within the Community Forest urban area, existing parks have a good supply of mature underused woodland. As part of this project, Local authority partners were encouraged to enable use of designated areas within the Mab Lane for Forest School. The Forest school outreach programme started by raising awareness of FS through a teacher taster day, schools were then offered 8 led FS sessions (for teachers and children) run by a qualified Forest School Leader at a local park woodland. The ultimate aim was for the schools after the 8 week period to commit to get their own school staff trained and run sessions in the future at newly set up sites. Of the 3 schools who participated all 3 have trained their staff, ensuring ongoing use of the park lands.

Research undertaken by the Mersey Forest has shown that children who engaged in Forest School lessons played more in natural areas and encouraged their families to visit parks and natural green spaces more frequently.

Engaging communities within the Mab Lane Community Woodland has led to significant economic regeneration of the areas, with less empty properties, lower antisocial behaviour, lower crime. Over 6<sup>th</sup> month period of engagement and improvement of the green space there was a 58% increase in the number of people who felt safe in the neighbourhood, satisfaction about living in their area increased by 61%.

[www.merseyforest.org.uk](http://www.merseyforest.org.uk) : Lord Taylor visit - Forestry Minister England, May 2012

[www.projectdirtliverpool.com/groups](http://www.projectdirtliverpool.com/groups)

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