

Responses to changing user demands in city park & Community gardens and therapy gardens as elements of public parks

User expectations in parks and gardens have changed over a number of years for various of reasons e.g,

1. Increased amount of time for recreation, sometimes due to early retirement or simply unemployment and people living longer.
2. Demand for more 'supervised' recreation, safe access for children etc.
3. More emphasis on 'Keep fit' exercise, jogging and power walking.
4. In Inner City areas simply somewhere to enjoy an outdoor space as more and more people choose to live in apartments/safe housing etc.

So parks and gardens cease to be a place in which to just perambulate babies but now as a competent contributor to the 'well-being' of the community.

Well being

Apart from the National Trust work on well-being and health benefits of parks and gardens, most gardens and parks aren't involved in many ways in this regard.

Obviously we all have the joggers, cyclists and power walkers but it doesn't end there. However, budget constraints within various departments in the NHS has led to a great amount of research on personal health.

Conclusions reached show that a large percentage of the population's health could be vastly improved just by being outside in the open air.

How we achieve that is not that difficult. Today many people are aware of 'alternative' health remedies, the beneficial effects of Tai Chi, Chi Kung etc. the use of natural energy to heal.

So simple introductions to these 'therapies' through such things as 'free hugging' helps, people appreciate the benefits of making use of such open spaces to benefit them in a physical way. We already are aware of the benefit of exercise in the case of heart surgery instead of walking on a machine why not encourage the medical profession to look at additional benefits of walking outside in the open air – we may even be able to gain an income from NHS for this?

Case study: National Trust 'Green Gyms'

Over the past couple of years the National Trust trial 'Green Gyms' in key gardens across the UK, some areas proved so successful they have continued the initiative. For example in North East England you can attend Tai Chi every Saturday at Gibside Landscape garden.

The National Trust were aiming promote the initiative by not 'telling' and rather 'encourage' to do more. This enforces their 'getting outdoor and closer to nature strategy' – so people can choose from a 'menu' of activity as to what suits them – what suits a family will certainly be different from what suits an independent couple so the idea is for people to be able to make their own 'bespoke' day. The website www.NTLakesOutdoors.org.uk currently in beta mode and gives people that chance to plan their own day, their own way.

This summer the National Trust are also encouraging people to use Great British Summer App with Facebook where people can design their 'perfect day' at a Trust property and then go to a voting panel and the best could win their own day worth up to £3k. e.g. dinner and dance with friends at a lighthouse, or a mini festival at a castle.



Disadvantaged groups

Increased numbers of disadvantaged groups in our community make it necessary to provide meaningful tasks for them to engage in. Particularly in parks and gardens where there is obviously a larger concentration of such groups.

Groups of less able people and people with special needs can benefit greatly from exposure to the natural environment, e.g START group in Salford, built their own garden with own food growing etc.

In many cases these groups form almost an additional 'volunteer' group though as already stated in a less able way.

Another group of disadvantaged people are young offenders. At present in various institutions young offenders are offered horticultural training as part of their rehabilitation. In addition positions are sought as placements for those who are close to release and can be trusted.

Obviously this puts a responsibility not only on an offender but on the owners of the garden open to the public who have a duty of care to their visitors.

Case study: Arley Hall & Gardens

Arley Hall & Gardens have had success in this area with young ones from the local young offenders institution. Joining the garden staff into their work, learning to interact with the public and complete a series of formal training upon release, at least one case the young person went on to set up a very successful garden maintenance business, even employing staff.

One of the major advantages to these ones is the mutual respect built up between them on the 'inside' and those on the 'outside'.

Case study: Cheshire's Gardens of Distinction

The current profile of visitors to Cheshire's gardens are primarily traditionalists which sit within the BC1CS demographic aged between 45 - 65 years where functionality is more important than style and they value good services unlikely to justify spend on expensive alternatives. The second visitor profile is the family market aged between 35 - 50 years, BC1C2 demographic who have children under 18 years, broadly idealistic, engage in the physical world rather than in cultural or aesthetic leisure activities.

The visitor survey findings clearly demonstrate Cheshire's gardens aren't reaching out to our core demographic as visitors to the gardens were overwhelmingly of 'White British' origin, with 97% identifying with this group.

However, the project CGoD have developed a partnership with Manchester Airport where they had the opportunity to work with school children from ethnically diverse backgrounds and range of socially economic backgrounds giving them the opportunity explore Cheshire's gardens and hopefully inspire and encourage the children to return with their families.



Volunteers

Many of the 27 Gardens of Distinction in Cheshire depend heavily on volunteers in order to maintain their gardens to a very high standard.

Initially, one might think that the use of volunteers is simply a form of 'cheap' labour, but that is not the case. Volunteers 'cost' in the input of time by regular garden staff who have to supervise the groups to ensure a high quality of work.

Case study: Tatton Park

Out of the five hundred plus volunteers 'employed' at Cheshire gardens, Tatton interviewed about seventy who collectively came up with the following reasons, in no specific order, why they volunteer.

1. Company: this is a fairly obvious one. Social interaction especially amongst those who retired early is always quoted as a reason for volunteering.
2. Health and fresh air: Benefit of being out in the fresh air and the exercise. According to research, weeding burns about 330 calories per hour, and walking burns about 281.
3. Spiritual benefit: the idea of being 'close to the earth'. Linked with this is a certain amount of nostalgia.
4. Valued: many volunteers are appreciated and valued as members of a team, generating a sense of purpose and ownership.

5. Employment: many unemployed people become volunteers in order to improve, or add to, their 'skills' to help them gain employment.
6. Supervision: garden staff can use volunteers as a means to improve their supervisory skills. Volunteers come from all walks of life, different skills need to be used in different ways.

Volunteers can be encouraged by offering formal training e.g NVQ, whilst giving their time to the garden.

Product development

It is important that we are all alert to opportunities to develop the product. Obviously every place has its list of events and functions but it is interesting how places have developed events which, without detracting from the core business, attract new audiences.

Case study: Tatton Park Biennial, Trentham Estate & Cholmondeley Pageant of Power

Development of sculpture, along with modern themes, has been something Tatton has been able to develop in the form of the Biennial. As the name suggests it is an event displaying every two years. It is an event which lasts all season. Along with the exhibition of sculpture pieces there are film shows, explanatory tours and workshops.

On a slightly different front we have the Barefoot walk at Trentham Gardens, a walk through knee deep mud. Described as 'an area of sensory delight with benefits to health, derived from the historic principles of Sebastian Kneipp'. This attracts a different group of people. This has now developed into the Trentham Walking Festival.

Clearly there are often obvious features which can be developed. Cholmondeley Castle would be a good example of this with their Pageant of Power, a celebration of anything to do with competition vehicles, bikes, boats and airplanes both vintage and modern. They have made use of the features of the estate to host an event which is unique.

