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Central Park Neighbourhood Management Trial Evaluation

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL · REAL IDEAS · National Trust · ARTS UNIVERSITY PLYMOUTH · Devon Wildlife Trust · THE DATA PLACE · UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH · EUROPEAN UNION European Regional Development Fund · UIA

Methodology

Evaluations were carried out by an independent contractor through interviews with key staff involved in project delivery during August/September 2023, site visits, and review of project monitoring information.

The neighbourhood management trials took place in four contrasting areas:

Central Park

Central Park was created in 1928 as a park for the whole city. It is highly valued by the people of Plymouth, holding a treasured place in many family memories. It is large and complex, comprising many spaces of different character attracting a diversity of users.

Derriford Community Park

Derriford Community Park is a new green space, wilder than Central Park. It lacks a longstanding community of users, and its value to the community is still being tested and developed.

Devonport and Stonehouse

Social Enterprise trails in Stonehouse/ Devonport communities focused on the wilding and development of under-used spaces. Their aim was to develop alternative approaches to management and financing that added value for the local community in a sustainable way.

Trees and Rewilding Corridors

Keyham Green Spaces were selected for evaluation as components of the Urban Trees and Wilding Corridors management trial. Keyham suffered a traumatic shooting incident in 2021 which led to calls for improved safety and to make green spaces more welcoming to overcome the fear of going out. Five spaces were reimagined by their users, mostly living in the immediate vicinity. A strategic plan brought a coherance to this work within the context of nature recovery.

Central Park neighbourhood management trial

What was proposed?

“Central Park is the city’s largest formal park at 94 hectares with hundreds of visitors per day. On a high plateau, the park suffers from drainage problems, hindering public access and contributing to downstream flooding. A Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SUDS) of swales and ponds sensitive to the historic context of the park will transform drainage problems into an asset that improves biodiversity and supports sensitive interaction with wildlife and water. It converts a traditional drain into a sustainable gravel drain, filtering water and carrying it towards a new swale into ponds, enhanced by native planting. The existing dysfunctional pond is replaced by a network of three linked ponds retaining mature trees and delivering necessary attenuation volume. The northern pond creates the missing end point for views along a key route through the park and delivers a grand entrance to the park enlivening the historic layout. The southern ponds are natural in appearance. Upstream, the Arboretum for the Future will provide a new focus to a quiet area of the park. Historically a formal pleasure garden, this area has a range of mature specimen trees, some coming to end of life. We will design and deliver a community tree planting scheme to create a city showpiece for climate resilient tree species which thrive in the local landscape, and help improve drainage. Design features such as viewing platforms, seating and physical /virtual interpretation and meaningful engagement will encourage use and understanding of both investments.

Assessment against Urban Wilding Principles

Support people & nature together	The Central Park investments have been designed to both support biodiversity and enhance climate resilience, but also to enhance amenity values for users of the park. Huq place monitoring data showed a 15% increase in footfall from 2022 to 2023, with approximately 2500 unique visitors per day. In relation to Green Minds events, 86% of 339 people asked strongly agreed or agreed that spending time in nature at Central Park was good for their health and wellbeing.
Promoting nature-inspired leadership	Land Management Apprentices were assigned the task of designing the Treescape for the Future project, as a way to help them develop their skills for working with nature. The three Green Minds Landscape Technician Apprentices created the design for Pounds Park, and were also involved with the design for Zoo Field which was created as part of a permaculture course alongside five Arts University Plymouth students, two local community members, and individuals from Snapdragons community group and National Trust. The SUDS scheme is designed with reference to nature-led principles, in effect mimicking and enhancing natural ecosystem services. The three Landscape Technician apprentices, with support from colleagues at Devon Wildlife Trust and Plymouth City Council, updated the Central Park woodland management plan taking into account changes to the landscape with the SUDs project, and also supported updating the wider park management plan.
Changing values & attitudes to nature	Interpretation for the Treescape and SUDs projects are designed to explain why changes are needed in the light of climate change. Arts University Plymouth students have created ponds and treescapes interpretation signage to demonstrate the importance of these habitats for local wildlife. Plymouth City Council also worked closely with Earthjump and the Montpelier Eco-Warrior group from the local primary school to create a tree trail in the Pounds Park area, encouraging site users to explore the wider area away from the paths and connect with nature through the children's stories written on storydoors beside a series of trees. In relation to Green Minds events, the following strongly agreed or agreed that spending time in nature at Central Park was good for their: • **Physical health – 87%** • **Socialising – 84%** • **Mental health – 89%** • **Feeling closer to nature – 86%** **488 people were engaged with Central Park** through volunteering during Green Minds, contributing over 1380 hours. Of the 2950 people who attended events in Central Park, 68% were new to Green Minds.
Developing co-stewardship for land management	The investments were co-designed with the community, through thematic working groups, meeting the diverse interests of the stakeholders involved in the park.
Secure benefits for the long-term	The treescape project is designed for resilience to climate change, with future-adapted trees included in the planting scheme. The SUDs project will lessen the impact of future climate change on flooding in the park, and contribute to urban cooling through the enlarged water bodies and their beneficial cooling effect during heatwaves.
Create purposeful data & information supported by digital infrastructure	The network of sensors installed in the park will gather data on micro-climate and help to monitor the benefits of the interventions for climate resilience and related health and wellbeing benefits. These will continue to be maintained and monitored beyond the life of the project.
Create resilient local economies	Flooding has economic impacts through damage to property and disruption to travel. The new stormwater attenuation capacity will contribute to a wider network of interventions designed to make the city more resilient to heavy rainfall.
Deliver nature recovery at multiple scales	The Central Park SUDs scheme nests within a city-wide plan for storm water management, across14 catchments.

What was achieved?

The Central Park investment, and the stakeholder forum supporting it, were inevitably affected by the impacts of covid, which greatly limited public engagement and engineering works for long periods. This necessitated much adaptation of the project workplan, but with some resulting benefits.

A functioning SUDs system has been constructed, planned for completion at the end of January 2024. The design provides renewed and remodelled ponds which deliver stormwater attenuation, biodiversity and amenity benefits. A newly planted 'Arboretum for the Future' features tree species adapted to the likely impacts of climate change, and helps improve drainage. Rewilded areas feature local biodiversity. Their design has involved local schools and has been a learning experience for Land Management Apprentices.

A strategy for park governance and stakeholder engagement in decision making was proposed in 2021. However, changes in the political administration and feedback from local partners and stakeholders showed:

- **a lack of capacity for volunteer groups and organisational staff to attend meetings**
- **a strong preference for operational groups to focus their time on particular themes or areas of the park according to their interests or needs**
- **a continued need for Council coordination and support to bridge the gaps between user groups and different departments within the Council**

As a result, the approach to support communication, shared decision-making and stewardship has moved away from one joint multi-stakeholder operational forum into the coordination of several strategic themed groups, which inform and are informed by wider stakeholder engagement. Key groups are focused on **Sport & Recreation**; **Enterprises & Events**; **Wildlife**; **Health and Wellbeing**; **and Broader Community Engagement**.

As delivery has progressed, and trust between stakeholders improved. In its final year Green Minds managed to bring the various interest groups together twice to share achievements and challenges. This has been welcomed and going forward the Council has secured funding with PP2 to have two members of staff based on the park with a particular focus on community and volunteer engagement and nature recovery. This includes a commitment to coordinating quarterly joint forums, in the park's Community Hub building.

What was successful?

Central Park is large and complex, with many interrelated but separate elements. As the project progressed it became apparent that the complexity was creating excessive demands on the stakeholder forum. A decision was taken to instead establish delivery-focused working groups for each element of park development. This approach boosted stakeholder motivation by better connecting them with their specific interests.

Involvement of the Land Management Apprentices in designing the wilding planting scheme was a great success, in that they brought new ideas and benefited from the responsibility. Being a smaller part of the Central Park works it was more appropriate in scale for schools engagement. In particular, this work uncovered the issue of safety for girls in the park which was identified as a key barrier to its use, and its role as a barrier to their use of it. A connection was forged with the charity Make Space for Girls, a charity, resulting in the involvement of girls from a school neighbouring the park in the design of spaces which better met their needs.

RIGHT: Pond Project landscaping site

The SUDs scheme has provided new knowledge, improved confidence to deliver such schemes, and partnerships such as the Local Lead Flood Authority, Environment Agency and South West Water. This has led to the development of **2 further SUDs initiatives in other city greenspaces** and a successful bid to DEFRA for a Natural Environment Readiness Grant to explore new Green Finance mechanisms for SUDS more widely.

What could be improved/what challenges were encountered?

The design of the SUDS scheme has itself been a complex project. Whilst the principles of sustainable drainage are simple, turning these into engineered solutions that work demands extensive and expensive studies. Further, knowledge of the practicalities of design is still at an early stage. Consequently, some of the proposed solutions have needed some modification after installation.

Changes in political administration caused some delays, due to new political leaders taking time to fully understand the project. Members of the community also took time to understand the project and considerable effort was made to communicate its aims and benefits, using accessible animated video etc. Considerable effort was made to accommodate community concerns, and costs have risen significantly compared to original budgets. The lengthy closure of parts of the park was unpopular.

What lessons have been learned?

Knowledge and expertise in SUDS design is still at an early stage, with lessons being learned during the practical operation of schemes. Novel SUDs designs should be adopted with caution. Adapting designs tested elsewhere is likely to be a less risky strategy. Learning from the Central Park scheme is being transferred to planned SUDS schemes in Trefusis Park and St Levan Park.

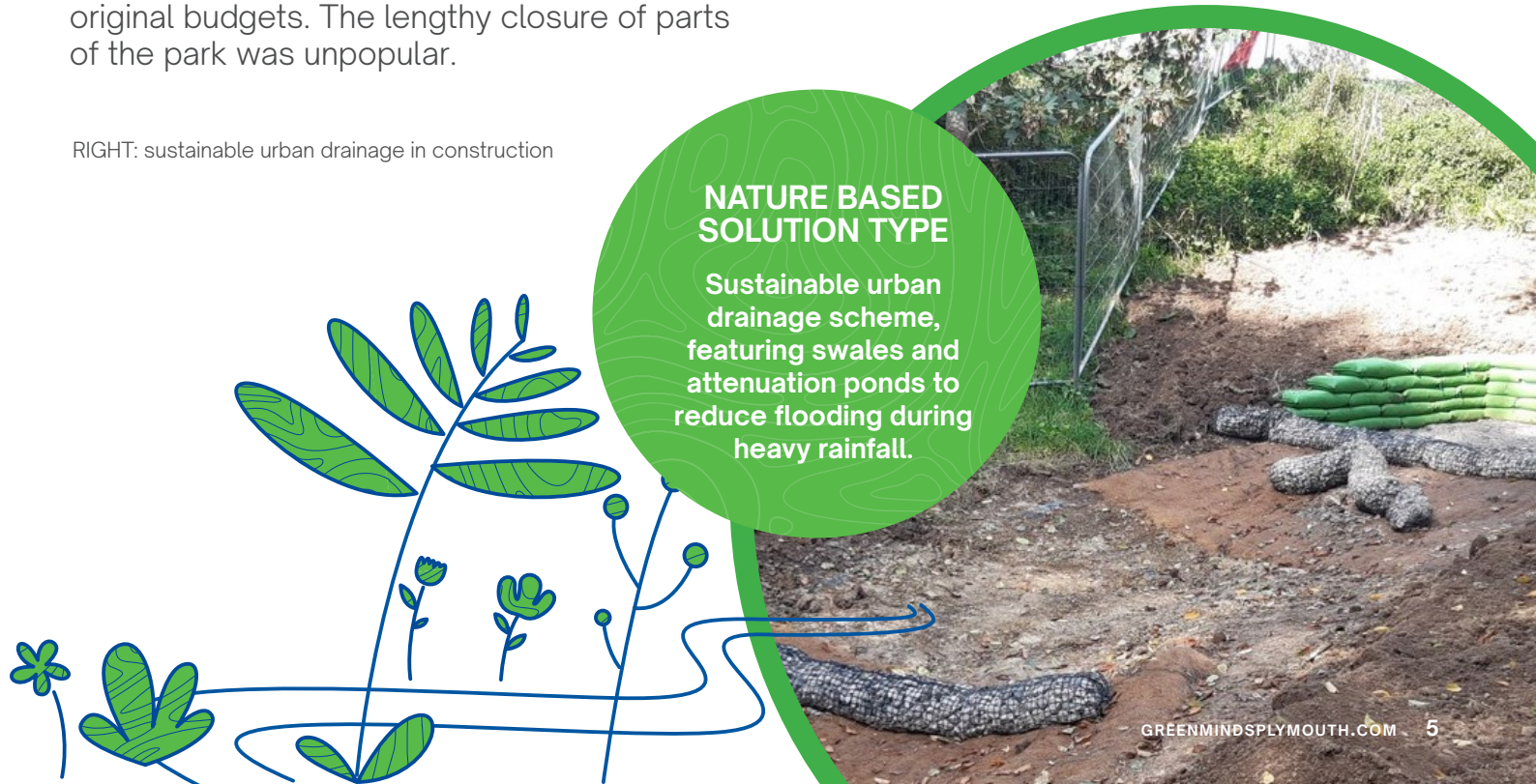
Engagement of the public in management of complex public areas can be more successful if broken down into delivery-focused groups. Stakeholders engage more readily with concerns of practice, than with policy and strategy.

Community co-stewardship represents a new model for running green spaces – one that is intended to give the community a greater say in decisions. However, this takes time and careful consideration should be given to the level at which stakeholders are involved, ensuring it meets their needs and interests. The trial highlighted a continued need for Council coordination and with recognition of this, partners secured additional funding to support ongoing community stewardship through their Green Community Hubs approach, with teams skilled in nature recovery and community engagement based at the park.

RIGHT: sustainable urban drainage in construction

NATURE BASED SOLUTION TYPE

Sustainable urban drainage scheme, featuring swales and attenuation ponds to reduce flooding during heavy rainfall.



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