

## 2.3 Empowering communities

- Involving and understanding community views coupled with a good understanding of the availability and quality of local spaces are essential for identifying areas of poor or under provision, and for planning new provision.
- Engaging communities in the decisions that affect them and the parks and green spaces they use will help to foster a greater sense of local ownership.
- There are different ways of enabling people to get more involved in their local green spaces, ranging from informing to direct ownership and management.
- Local people are experts in what they want and need, but they often require professional assistance to build capacity for delivery.

Communities play a unique role in creating better local environments and places. Some of the most successful spaces are created and cared for by the community, the people who use the spaces and who know what is needed. For example, it is estimated that ‘friends of’ groups have contributed approximately £35m in terms of their time commitment and involvement in local spaces.

Communities should be asked what they like about their green spaces, what they dislike and what needs improving. A range of tools for engaging communities are available, but whatever tool is used engagement must have a clear purpose. Those being consulted should know why their views are being canvassed and should be given feedback.

Empowering local people is a priority for the Government. People want to be involved in decisions but many do not believe they can influence decisions that affect the area where they live. To change this, we need to engage local people by:

- providing information to the community
- consulting the community

- building community leadership
- allowing community decision-making
- enabling community ownership.

When consulting the community, the full range of ages, cultures, needs and aspirations need to be taken into account. In some spaces, the needs of different users can conflict, but evidence shows that discussions and communication between different groups can improve understanding and tolerance of each other’s different needs<sup>5</sup>.

Every local authority is now required to produce a statement of community involvement in relation to their Local Development Framework. This should set out the local planning authority’s policy for getting communities involved in preparing and revising local development documents and in considering planning applications. The authority must say what it is trying to get the community involved in, how and when it will do it, and who will be involved.

Various arrangements for neighbourhood management are emerging to help local

5 CABE Space’s ‘Involving young people in the design and care of public spaces’

people and local authorities to improve the responsiveness of public services, including the provision and management of green spaces. The Government is currently discussing ideas about extending neighbourhood arrangements and other options in its publication "*Citizen Engagement: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*".

### The principles of community involvement

To involve communities in their local services and areas, the following are needed.

- A commitment to take action
- Organisational commitment, including adequate resources
- Recognition that community involvement is a continuous process
- Links to democratic structures
- Openness, honesty and transparency
- Inclusion and representation
- Appropriate processes
- More than consultation
- Clear measures of success

### Valuing the voluntary and community sector

The voluntary and community sector (VCS) is well placed to play an important role in creating, enhancing and managing local open space. It is more capable of direct engagement with communities on community improvement projects, than national, local and public authorities.

Organisations in this sector can often bridge the gap between the local authority and the communities they serve. These organisations are often already operating in an area, and have strong relationships with the community. These relationships can be enhanced by active engagement with the voluntary and community sector by local authorities.

The Government is committed to developing the potential of the voluntary and community sector in ensuring quality green spaces.

### Tools for success

**Consultation** can be undertaken in a variety of ways including residents' groups, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), 'friends of' groups, community surveys, green spaces surveys, focus groups, workshops and events.

**Planning for Real**, a process developed by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation is useful for considering opportunities for development. [www.nif.co.uk](http://www.nif.co.uk)

**CABE Space** is developing a community consultation tool that allows park users



and managers to assess the quality of local spaces. [www.cabespace.org.uk](http://www.cabespace.org.uk)

**Placecheck**, developed by the Urban Design Alliance, can be useful in asking introductory questions about what people like, dislike and think most needs improving in a space. This can be useful in developing a process of engagement as it is a cost effective process with which to start. [www.ice.org.uk](http://www.ice.org.uk)

**Engaging Communities** is a guidance document by GreenSpace that provides good practice in how to involve the community in decision-making, as well as in providing and caring for green spaces. GreenSpace also provides specialist support to community and 'friends of' groups, and a community network. [www.green-space.org.uk](http://www.green-space.org.uk)

**Statement of Community Involvement** – *Creating Local Development Frameworks: A Companion Guide to PPS12* includes advice on managing community involvement and explains the requirement for local planning authorities to have a 'statement of community involvement'. [www.planningportal.gov.uk](http://www.planningportal.gov.uk)

**Connecting with Communities.** The information and resources in this section of the IDeA Knowledge website are designed to help local authorities to improve their communication with residents and other key stakeholders. [www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk](http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk)

**Voluntary and community organisations** are a valuable resource for developing green spaces. There are too many organisations to list here but we have listed some of the key organisations working with Government.

- **Groundwork's federation** of local trusts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, carry out environmental regeneration



projects, often in the most deprived communities. [www.groundwork.org.uk](http://www.groundwork.org.uk)

- **GreenSpace**, a membership organisation that provides information and assistance for the improvement of all parks and green spaces, for local authorities and in particular community groups. [www.green-space.org.uk](http://www.green-space.org.uk)
- **BTCV**, a national practical conservation charity, providing volunteering opportunities, training and initiatives such as the Green Gym. [www.btcv.org.uk](http://www.btcv.org.uk)

### In practice

#### A garden created by the community, for the community

George Road Bible and Memorial Garden was developed on 0.16 hectares of disused burial ground surrounding King's Community Church in Warley, Sandwell, on the edge of the Black Country. Action triggered by the sale of the old church created an opportunity for the community to turn it into a unique community green space. The King's

Community Church Environmental Group, with the help of volunteers, and financial input from Groundwork, and the Hanson Environment Fund, has created the Bible and Memorial Gardens.

The Memorial Garden was opened in 2001. Uniquely, the Bible Garden is planted with trees and shrubs mentioned in the Bible. The group has now extended the scope of the space to include a Memorial area for contemplation. More recent landscaping of the site took place in 2004 with the help of a Living Spaces grant of £23,000. New features include a children's maze, interpretation of Old Warley's Well, and additional seating areas. The new funding enabled the group to employ local crafts people and an artist to design benches, wood carvings, and publicity material.

The garden, much admired by local residents, is now used for community events such as barbecues and garden fetes. Pupils from a local primary school visit the site and help with tasks such as bulb planting. The Oldbury Learning Network is promoting the garden to other local groups. As a result more people now visit the garden and help out occasionally.

The garden is maintained on a weekly basis (every Wednesday morning) by a group of 3 committed volunteer gardeners. Tea and toast are provided by the coffee morning, which meets in the church building. Occasionally Saturday morning 'work days' are organised to tackle larger tasks, such as a planting day in November 2004 and a recent event to concrete in benches, which together were attended by 20 local volunteers.

In spite of receiving a substantial grant from Living Spaces in 2004, the Environmental Group does not receive any ongoing funding for maintenance. A recent initiative is to sell greeting cards featuring pictures of the garden, made by local people. The group has received some funding for this project from Sandwell Council for Voluntary Organisations.

The Garden has won a Green Pennant Award for 3 consecutive years.

### **From bog to community haven**

A local community association has led an initiative to transform a neglected open space on a deprived rural estate into a popular resource for local people in Leyland, Lancashire.

The project came about through the local community's determination to do something about their local park, the only open space on the Wymott estate. The estate, built to house staff of Wymott Prison, is a hidden pocket of need in an otherwise affluent ward. There are few community facilities and poor public transport links to nearby service centres.



With the help of Groundwork Wigan and Chorley Borough Council local people drew up draft ideas and started a two-year search for funding, which eventually led them to apply to the Countryside Agency's Doorstep Greens initiative. The offer of a 'project preparation grant' – a feasibility study to fund a community consultation and a full landscape design – enabled them to put together a successful bid for a full 'creation grant' to create and maintain the park. The landowners, Chorley Borough Council, handled the grant funds and undertook to carry out routine maintenance. Eventually resources were secured through Doorstep Greens (NOF Lottery), WREN (Landfill Tax), Chorley Borough Council, Barclays Sitesavers.

The 1.3 hectares of boggy, neglected space has now been transformed into a new green haven, with a wildflower meadow, hedgerows, newly planted trees, footpaths, seating and play equipment. It was the first of 200 Doorstep Greens to be completed in England. The project is a success because it has been genuinely community-led and has built strong partnerships between the local community, the council and Groundwork project managers. Residents were fully involved in the design, creation and maintenance of the green and were determined to find the funding, see the project through and work with others to achieve their aims.

Helen Williams, Project Manager from the Wymott Estate Community Association said, 'All this work has transformed it from a boggy, under-used area into a green space which will be a real asset to the area and a great place for local people to meet and the children to play.'

