



The

Book
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Return of the Parkie

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council's ground-breaking borough-wide Urban Park Ranger Service completed its first year of service in May of this year.

Mike Bent looks at the impact that bringing back the parkie has had on Bury's green spaces and the people who use them.

Close Park Sensory Garden

This upbeat, hands-on new service has already made its mark throughout the community. A number of key steps have been taken that are making a major difference to the public face of Bury's parks.

The transformation of Bury's parks into safe and welcoming places first started in 1998 when the Parks and Countryside Service was the subject of a best value review. As part of this appraisal a consultation exercise was undertaken and the views of residents sought. This ascertained that what the community wanted was for parks to be safer with better security and for the community to be involved in the way they are managed. This has been achieved through the introduction of the Ranger Service and 'friends of' groups, but also by opening up the aspect of the parks, instigating a range of physical refurbishments and developments, improving maintenance regimes and measures to reduce antisocial behaviour.

In 2002 the Park Ranger Service began a partnership with a local community residents' association close to Openshaw Park in East Bury, which is Bury's highest area of deprivation. A bid for funding was successful through SRB5 for a three-year period for a pilot park ranger. It was then up to the Parks and Countryside team and residents' association to make it work and justify the continued need.

In 2003 the Bury Children's Fund was established, which provided another opportunity to submit a funding bid with the aim of introducing a park ranger into the town of Radcliffe. This bid was also successful, and initially 12 months' funding was given with the proviso that if all targets were met then a further two years' funding would be given. Right from the outset both of the pilot projects worked well and were extremely well received within the communities in which they were based.

Towards the end of 2004 another opportunity to seek funding to help revolutionise Bury's parks arose. Under the ODP's Liveability Programme, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC) was one of only three in the North West and twenty-seven nationally to be successful in achieving a £3m boost. This enabled a further six park rangers to be appointed and the borough-wide service began in the summer of 2004.

The programme is based on sustainability and therefore there was a need to establish revenue money from BMBC to ensure funding and continuance of the service after the Liveability Fund has finished. This has been realised through BMBC's Cleaner Safer Greener initiative, making six of the posts permanent with the remaining two posts being made permanent from April 2006, after seeing out the final Liveability funding. The Liveability funding has also provided kick-start support towards establishing permanent ranger bases in Bury's parks.

Currently, the Park Ranger Service is made up of eight uniformed park rangers working throughout the six townships of Bury, Ramsbottom, Tottington, Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich. Working in pairs, the rangers look after 14 major parks and link into 28 other leisure

sites including 13 countryside areas. They also assist colleagues in the Countryside Ranger Service by carrying out monthly health and safety inspections of countryside sites located close to their ranger bases.

Over the first twelve months the Park Ranger Service has utilised a range of traditional and modern approaches to:

- ◆ Deliver 111 events in parks throughout the borough with 1000 children and adults attending and enjoying themselves. These have ranged from small-scale craft events to "have a go" sports sessions and have helped the Park Ranger Service engage with local people and children and gives park users a positive experience of Bury's parks.

- ◆ Help numerous local community and statutory groups to stage their own events in parks.

- ◆ Set up, in partnership with the Countryside Ranger Service, an education programme for delivery to the borough's primary schools. To date 24 schools have participated involving 655 children. Pupils are taught about a range of environmental and other issues related to parks and open spaces. Sessions have ranged from pond dipping to mini-greenhouses and even design-a-park events.

- ◆ Work with schools and other statutory bodies through the "Crucial Crew" initiative. This initiative helps to teach children how to access Bury's parks safely using a play scenario that encourages the children to ask questions about the scene they see.

- ◆ Set up two gardening clubs in Openshaw Park and Whitehead Park with fantastic results. This type of project has been put in place to allow people who don't have a garden the opportunity to come and have a go in their local park and allows them to improve the quality and standard of their park.

- ◆ Establish a volunteer programme whereby local people can get involved in looking after their local park and help the Park Ranger Service. This is achieved through undertaking various tasks within the park - helping out on events, patrolling, or simply helping out with litter picking as they walk their dogs.

- ◆ Keep users safe and keep the parks clean by regularly carrying out patrols around the park, reporting any problems and clearing graffiti as it occurs. The rangers also work with the police and community safety officers.

- ◆ Help set up, run and support the twelve 'Friends of' groups established throughout the Borough. The next stage is to move the groups towards a community-run group. We are currently looking at the feasibility of setting up twinning arrangements with 'friends of' groups in other areas, starting with a scheme with John Leigh Park in Trafford.

- ◆ Consult the local community around the parks resulting in a number of very successful projects like the sensory garden at Close Park in Radcliffe which was completed by the community in June of this year.

- ◆ Deliver a Health Walk programme aimed at getting people more active and using their parks to support increased physical activity. The programme is delivered in partnership with BMBC Sports Development Team. Each park ranger has been

trained as a health walk leader and Sports Development are looking to develop the programme to take referrals from GP surgeries and the Bury Primary Care Trust.

Bury's Park Ranger Service is a resounding success. It has added value to our parks, made them safer and more welcoming, made an important contribution towards a range of wider initiatives such as attaining Green Flag accreditation, supported the town's entry in the annual North West in Bloom and Britain in Bloom competitions and helped support Bury's far-reaching ambition of achieving a cleaner, safer, greener borough.

This year eight parks in Bury won Green Flags for 2006. This now means that there is at least one Green Flag park within each Area Board boundary in the Borough. Bury's winning parks have resulted from an impressive team effort across a range of council services including everyone in the Parks and Countryside Service, Grounds Maintenance, static gardeners based in parks, Bury Street Care teams and Sports Development. There has also been much support from Executive Members, Ward Councillors, the Area Boards, and local volunteers from within the community ■

Mike Bent is Bury Metropolitan Borough Council's Parks and Open Spaces Officer.

CABE Space has recently launched Park Force, a campaign to bring staff back into parks. For more information about Park Force, visit the website at www.cabespace.org.uk

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