

Evaluation of Natural Neighbours project for Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust



Natural Neighbours woodland engagement activity 2021

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Summary

In 2017, Natural Neighbours, led by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as a five-year project. The project intended to focus on making gradual and incremental change, rather than ambitious capital developments, through delivery of activities which would enable people to use, enjoy, improve and reclaim local green spaces in four green spaces in Rotherham: Eldon Road Recreation Ground, Boston Park, Winterhills and Sandhill Park. Anticipated outcomes for the project included an increase in community pride, improved wellbeing, improved access to green space, residents connecting with nature and greater community ownership of local parkland.

The ways in which Natural Neighbours has worked with communities has deliberately varied across the four sites. In two areas, the project adopted a community building approach in order to engage more marginalised communities and support greater community ownership of the green spaces. In the other two areas, a participative though more traditional consultation and engagement approach took place. The approach of enthusing children and young people, and building relationships with residents and community groups has been a significant aspect of this project. Joint working with organisational partners has also benefited the project, for example, Clifton Learning Partnership, Casting Innovations, RMBC Green Spaces and Neighbourhoods teams.

Learning from the evaluation includes an assessment of what has enabled progress and what has hindered or got in the way. The factors helping include time, the approach, interested residents and volunteers, partnership working, the team, flexibility, benefits of being based in a bigger organisation and those hindering include contested spaces, Covid:19, administration and bureaucracy, a lack of consistency across the project team, seasonal timings.

The pandemic stymied the process for a significant chunk of the project's timeline and led to a necessary change in the project approach. In the light of time lost over 2020-21, the project has been extended for a further six months, though at this point (August 2022) there is evidence that some of the anticipated outcomes have been met. The learning includes highlights that:

- Support and encouragement for local people to take part in volunteering and activity days has been very successful, though the evidence points to a more nuanced understanding of what might be classed as volunteering.
- There are many examples of children and adults taking part in outdoor and physical activity in each site and it is observed that there are more people have used, and are using, the spaces, and in different ways.
- Local people have gained new skills in tree planting, wildflower meadow creation, creating paths and laying steps. Children have learnt to spot species of trees and wildlife, and have experienced safe fire lighting, den building, making bird boxes and wayfinding signs.
- There is improved access, signage and information.

As an innovative project within the conservation sector, there are many lessons to be learnt. This was never going to be an easy project and the projected outcomes were always going to be challenging in some of the targeted neighbourhoods. It has however, demonstrated alternative ways of involving people, methods that might not lead to a direct correlation with funding targets but which have the potential to make a qualitative difference to community identities of place and space.

This has been a formative and summative evaluation process, running from 2019 to 2022. This report is a qualitative assessment rather than a record of outputs. In addition to this report, eight short films have been produced which complement the case studies.

PART 1

1 Introduction

The project and rationale

In 2017, Natural Neighbours, led by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as a five-year project. This was seen to be a significant amount of time, allowing for the building of meaningful relationships with communities and agency partners to aid project delivery. The project intended to focus on making gradual and incremental change rather than ambitious capital developments through delivery of activities which would enable people to use, enjoy, improve and reclaim local green spaces in four green spaces in Rotherham: Eldon Road Recreation Ground, Boston Park, Winterhills and Sandhill Park.

There is much evidence to support the relationship between access and use of green space and individual and community wellbeing in its broadest sense. Most recently, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities stated in a UK Policy paper that

“The past few years have only reiterated the importance of being able to access the outdoors and be in green space to look after our mental and physical wellbeing. For many, urban green spaces are the main connection to our natural world, but they also provide an important community identity. ... Well-designed public spaces support a variety of activities and encourage social interaction, to promote health, well-being, social and civic inclusion. They are intrinsic to creating pride in our places, reflecting the unique culture and heritage of the communities they serve, “ (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, Levelling Up Parks Fund: Prospectus, August 2022).

In addition, the significance of assessing use and value of green space has been promoted. The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs has created an outdoor recreation valuation tool, Orval, which assesses the value provided by parks, woodlands, riverside walks etc., and Garip et al, (2020)¹ proposed assessment against outcomes such as resident understanding of the value of green space, confidence to use the space, nature connection, meaningful experience and involvement in green spaces.

This policy and research analysis fitted with Rotherham council’s ambitions, going right back to a stated vision in 2010 which still guides policy such as the Local Plan adopted in 2019:

“Rotherham: a place where people’s lives are improved by having access to a network of safe, well-used Green Spaces offering a wide range of recreational and learning opportunities in high quality, sustainable environments” (Rotherham Green Space Strategy summary)

¹ Garip, G., Richardson, M., Tinkler, A., Glover, S., & Rees, A. (2020). Development and implementation of evaluation resources for a green outdoor educational program. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 1-15. <https://findingnature.org.uk/2020/12/14/connecting-with-green-spaces/>
The Guardian article, accessed 25.7.22

In addition, RMBC's Thriving Neighbourhoods strategy 2018-2025 talked about improved use of social and community assets (RMBC, 2018) and the 'Like Rotherham' 2019-26 cultural strategy stressed the value of participation in parks, countryside and green spaces, as leading to better health, better education and better jobs.

A focus on outcomes was reflected in the aims of the Natural Neighbours project. Anticipated outcomes for the project included an increase in community pride, improved wellbeing, improved access to green space, residents connecting with nature and greater community ownership of local parkland.

Evaluation approach

This has been an independent formative and summative process, following the Natural Neighbours project from 2019 to the present. It has involved building a contextual picture from a range of interests and perspectives, and testing early analysis with those who have participated in order to feed information back to the project in a timely manner. There have been regular reflections sessions with the staff team and a critical friend role to constructively analyse the process and outcomes.

The aim was to ensure that:

- all relevant stakeholders were part of the evaluation process
- different perspectives and experience were shared and valued
- appropriate creative approaches were used to encourage participation
- achievements were identified as well as any issues to be resolved

This report is a qualitative assessment rather than a record of outputs. A summary of evaluation methods is in Appendix 1. In addition to this report, eight short films have been produced, four near the start of the evaluation process, and latterly a further four films have been made to sit alongside and illustrate the case studies.

2 Key activities

The Natural Neighbours approach

The ways in which Natural Neighbours has worked with communities has deliberately varied across the four sites. As a stakeholder in one community reflected: *“One size does not fit all”*. In two areas, the project adopted a community building approach in order to engage more marginalised communities and support greater community ownership of the green spaces. Community building refers to community work processes that encourage and foster relationships, connections and a sense of identity and confidence, all of which can contribute to resident-led action and community change. In the other two areas, a participative though more traditional consultation and engagement approach took place.

Community building

It was anticipated from the start that Eastwood would require a long lead in time, due to the demographics of the neighbourhood and the perceived issues surrounding Eldon Road Recreation Ground. Together, Natural Neighbours and a locally based organisation, Clifton Learning Partnership (CLP), identified opportunities for community engagement through new provision related to outdoor learning for boys in the Roma community. Regular after school sessions offered the boys opportunities to have fun and discover the green space on their doorsteps, to learn about its wildlife and to develop knowledge and skills through engaging in environmental and adventure activities. Natural Neighbours project staff spent time getting to know local residents and key workers in Eastwood Village, helped out with a regular litter picking group, frequented the community café and organised a community visit to another park to stimulate ideas around use of the natural environment. This informal drop-in work and contact with the boys and their families helped to build connections with the community. It was however a fragile relationship – trust building with the Roma community in particular is a long-term endeavour and the capacity of Natural Neighbours and its approach of running blocks of sessions for young people with gaps in between was perceived as a bit ‘stop-start’. Whilst extremely valuable early on in the project, it was hard to reinstate some of these relationships following the pandemic. For greater detail, see Eldon Road case study, p26.

The second of the four sites to be prioritised by Natural Neighbours was Boston Park. This is also a complex area to work in, given it is bordered by two very different neighbourhoods and community groups with diverse interests and priorities. There is the long-standing Friends of Boston Castle and Parklands group led by people from the top of the park and others with a historical and environmental interest. At the bottom of the hill is Canklow, which includes some environmental enthusiasts but also many residents who did not make full use of the green space and had to negotiate litter and fly tipping to access it. Natural Neighbours worked with children and young people, facilitating weekly outdoor sessions which included litter picking and environmental learning activities - gradually taking them further into the woods to build confidence around using the green space. Relationships were built with parents, and Natural Neighbours staff joined some local residents in community organiser training sessions, provided by a Rotherham wide organisation with the aim of developing community leadership. Relationships built with residents in Canklow have continued and helped to ensure greater community involvement. For greater detail, see Boston Park case study, p22.

Community engagement

Consultation activities took place on all four sites, albeit in different ways. At Boston Park for example ‘walk and talks were organised where residents could familiarise themselves with the space, ask questions, mark on maps what they liked and where they would like to make changes. This was followed by an outdoor action planning workshop. A follow up survey of residents who had participated in the walks included the comments:

“They explained they were trying to encourage people to use green spaces which I think is a fab idea”

“I thoroughly enjoyed the walk and found areas of discussion most interesting and in some cases illuminating”

“I was not too sure what to expect but the guide was very professional and showed a great interest in the park and developing its potential”

At Winterhills, a consultation walk with council and other stakeholders helped to build relationships and ran alongside a community based meeting in a church hall. At Sandhill Park, consultation was carried out alongside family engagement activities. In Eastwood, informal conversations were initiated with individuals, and with families on a trip to a nearby country park. In 2021, a RMBC officer commented that:

“It has been helpful because they have the capacity to link with the different communities in the areas they are working in which we don’t have. Getting people’s different perspectives on the sites – we don’t have this opportunity”.

The potential as well as the reality for engagement and for attracting **volunteers** in environmental activities was unequal across the different sites. It was believed that it was always going to be harder to find local residents who wanted to volunteer in Eastwood Village for example. As a RMBC officer commented: *“People should not underestimate how difficult it is to do engagement with the Roma community in Eastwood”*. What appears to have worked best here is engagement through specific organisations e.g. CLP, and the South Yorkshire Fire Cadets. Natural Neighbours was more successful at Boston Park and at Winterhills, with regard to both one-off activities, such as tree planting at Winterhills, and regular volunteering days. Although numbers of volunteers were lower than hoped for, those that have routinely turned up to help have made a big difference to clearing undergrowth and pathways, and making space for stepped access on both sites. Engagement in Sandhill Park has worked up to a point – families have come along to environmental activities in the school holidays for example, but recruitment of volunteers has proved to be a struggle.

It is this aspect of the project which has been the most hampered by the pandemic, as well as frustrating for project workers. The project timeline which came a bit of a cropper in 2020-21, along with staff capacity which has been uneven throughout the project, have particularly hampered efforts at Winterhills and Sandhill Park. Both of these spaces might well have benefited from earlier and more targeted intervention such as the community building approach taken in Eastwood Village and Boston Park/Canklow, and through subsequent locally informed community engagement

strategies and relevant communication methods. The most recent family fun day event at Sandhill Park for example (July 2022) attracted more people than previous activities, including potential volunteers, but it has taken a while to get to this point.

Pandemic activities

Formal lockdowns, a consequent lack of confidence to mix with others on the part of some individuals, and organisational risk management structures, all contributed to a need to change the project approach. At the start of the pandemic, there was a commonly held view that things would be back to normal quite soon. This was not to be the case and as time went on Natural Neighbours staff felt stymied in progressing the project. Nevertheless, they did adapt and a number of initiatives proved to be valuable to families and helped to maintain some of the connections that had been built.

Firstly, project workers produced wildlife packs which were distributed by the council's Early Help team in Eastwood and in Canklow during summer 2020.

Feedback from families was positive:

"We enjoyed doing the activities together as a family."

"The girls all loved the activities and loved the creative side and reading the information and spending lots of time in the garden as a family."

"We have been really pleased with the kit and have really enjoyed making it together, it was a lovely activity at the right time."

"The children loved making the bird boxes with their grandmother, and are hoping to attract more animals into their garden."

"Great activity for lockdown and in isolation."

"The children loved it and it helped them to share, they made clay bird feeders which we hung outside. We also enjoyed making the masks."

In addition, project workers created fun environmental and adventure activities at a distance in Boston Park. This included leaving materials for tree decorating and den building, with activity guidance shared through social media. Again, these activities were well received – families posted photographs of their creations and their engagement in local green space.

While the Natural Neighbours project was able to adapt its activities in the two areas where relationships had been built, the pandemic did delay planned project development and there was an impact on starting work in the two. The unforeseen crisis of COVID-19 upset the project timeline and has hampered the achievement of outcomes across the whole project. Indeed, occurrences of the virus are still preventing staff from working and residents from engaging to this day.

Training

Training was built into the project with the aim that local people would learn new skills and some would complete certificated courses. Like other activities, this has been seriously challenged by the pandemic. As soon as was possible however, in Autumn 2021, a outdoor family learning course was run, with some participants working towards the accreditation.

Training participants were diverse, from residents to project workers from the public and voluntary sector. One local mum and children's leader who taught children how to find buried treasure in the woods and make a campfire was delighted at the number of children who joined in and enjoyed it. Other reflections included:

"I use the park lots with my children doing things like den making, walks etc."

"Enjoyed having the experience and pushing my boundaries."

"The community largely uses the outdoors and enjoys it, so this training fits in well."

"To gain experience, to have something to do with the kids. I can get more kids involved if outside, due to numbers inside being limited. Might be able to take 10 if outside."

This last quote above was representative of several participants who felt that their new outdoor skills meant they could offer activities to more people than if they were inside. Another found the training particularly useful in the context of COVID-19 as families were wanting to go out but fed up just going for a walk and not sure how to make best use of local parks: *"I came on the training to get ideas, and every session has had things I could see them doing. found the games a good way of engaging people/getting people out into a local park. Even now numbers are limited for indoor sessions, so for my job and targets it's more beneficial to be outside- it ticks two boxes"..*

And needless to say, the huge rucksack of resources was very popular, and described as: *"superb"*.

Management plans and implementation

Management plans were designed for all four areas based on the consultations and action planning with local communities. These have provided a way forward in the short term plus a shopping list of ideas for the future. One RMBC officer commented that: *"Natural Neighbours has brought an understanding of how the landscape in parks and green spaces works and this will be useful in the future"*. The management plan for Eldon Road recreation ground has already proved useful as a tool to help plan the regeneration of the town centre, Eastwood and Templeborough.

Approval of the management plans has not always been straightforward – the first one which was created for Eldon Road required amendments through negotiations with RMBC, with regard to ongoing maintenance and sustainability of proposed projects. Indeed, in all areas, the management plans took longer than anticipated to be approved and this slowed down their implementation. The six months extension granted to Natural Neighbours will be of great benefit here as works that need to be done in the autumn and winter can now still go ahead – there had been a concern that the project would be over before it had delivered what it promised.

The Natural Neighbours project has enthused some community members to be involved in delivering the works required in the management plans – through volunteering days and through workshops where children have made bird boxes for example. In addition, colleagues in the Wildlife Trust have contributed additional skills such as step building, and design of the interpretation boards and meadow creation.

Interpretation boards were always part of the Natural Neighbours plan – boards that display the green space, walking routes, the history of the area, information about the local habitat and suggested activities. These too have been subject to drawn out processes across different council departments. However, mock up boards have been taken out to communities and five interpretation boards (one for Eldon Road rec, Sandhill Park and Boston Park, and two for Winterhills) should be in place soon. These will be important, partly to publicly acknowledge the value of the green spaces but also to point people to walking routes – there would have been no point in all the path clearing work if there is no information about where to walk for example.

Relationship building and partnership working

The Natural Neighbours project funding proposal (2017) was based on consultation with, and support from, potential partners – community groups, voluntary organisations, schools and the local authority. These were not formal project partners as such but it was anticipated that these organisations would support project delivery and a long-term legacy.

The building of relationships with residents and community groups are described above and in the case studies. Of particular note is the investment in making community connections with residents in Eastwood Village and the involvement of the Friends of Boston Park, Canklow Rainbow Kids Club and Canklow Kidz.

Joint working with organisational partners has been strongest with Clifton Learning Partnership, Casting Innovations, three Eastwood primary schools and RMBC – the Green Spaces team, the Neighbourhoods team, and local councillors. Additional working relationships have included collaborations with British Red Cross, RMBC Early Years team, South Yorkshire Housing Association, Refugee Council, South Yorkshire Fire Cadets and connections made through the Eastwood multi-agency group.

There has been a very positive working relationship between Natural Neighbours and **Clifton Learning Partnership (CLP)**. CLP was supportive of the project from the start and introduced workers to the local community. It provided a community venue where project workers could make themselves familiar to residents and join in community-based initiatives such as litter picking. Discussions with CLP in the very early days of the project led to the prioritising of work with boys from the Roma community, a relationship that has been described as '*skilfully built*' and '*impressive*'. CLP worked with Natural Neighbours to ensure a large (and diverse) community turn out on a visit to a country park in 2020, designed to illustrate the possibilities of using green space. CLP have helped with translation where appropriate e.g. signage for the tree planting project, and two CLP staff members attended the environmental play training put on by Natural Neighbours and provided a venue for the final part of this. Mostly then, this has been a very effective partnership, beneficial to

all concerned. There was the potential for an even closer working relationship through the offer of desk space at CLP, an offer that was not taken up by Natural Neighbours though is still on the table.

Castings Innovations (Castings) is a social enterprise based in Canklow. Natural Neighbours went along to an open day hosted by Castings and South Yorkshire Housing Association, and immediately saw the potential for working together. This collaboration has resulted in three joint projects:

- Castings hosted an artist to engage children and their families around issues of environmental concern
- Castings has worked with children to make bird and bat boxes from recycled materials. These will be put up in Boston Park and Canklow Woods
- Castings has worked with children and young people to produce wayfinding signs for Boston Park

There are explicit benefits of this partnership to Castings, to Natural Neighbours and the residents of Canklow. Castings has financially benefited from the commission to act as a community hub and help deliver the Natural Neighbours plans for Boston Park. It has also given it a purpose to work with the community in which it is based through producing something which will improve the green space on the doorstep. The Natural Neighbours project now has a base it can use in Canklow, it has met and engaged more residents through Castings and has been able to deliver aspects of the Boston Park implementation plan through a local partner working with the local community: *“The really wonderful thing here is that Casting Innovations has been able to be a focal point and take a central role in the community, doing what we can’t do”* (Natural Neighbours project worker). Local families have learnt new knowledge and skills about repurposing materials, woodworking and the natural environment as well as becoming more directly engaged in it. The Director of Castings has appreciated the Natural Neighbours approach of relating the process to the outcomes they are trying to achieve and reflected that: *“Amazingly enthusiastic kids. Could relate to birds and bats as something they see everyday”*.

Connections made with three **local primary schools in Eastwood** have broadened the involvement of children in their local environment. Children have been involved in a range of environmental activities from outdoor games to wildlife spotting to tree and bulb planting.

One school was already looking to establish an eco-club and so opportunities to work with the Natural Neighbours project was very timely but all three have reflected on the project’s positive impact on the children and how it has fostered other work around nature. One school project focussed on Eldon Road rec and the small changes that would make a big difference. With Natural Neighbours support, the children looked at urban habitats and what they would like to do with the park. This resulted in the making of bird boxes and a presentation to the Natural Neighbours project.

One teacher has talked about how children and their families now have a greater sense of what is on their doorstep and the important role that the Natural neighbours project has in showing that green spaces in urban area are there to be used and are worthy of being looked after. Natural Neighbours hopes to continue to connect with the schools in its extension period but as one teacher stated: *“If*

they can get more funding will continue working with them, but even if can't, have got enough out of this connection that can do the same in their own little wooded area at school".

The relationship with the council has been complex, largely due to differing agendas and ways of working across departments. The Natural Neighbours project has endeavoured to build relationships with a variety of council partners including the Green Spaces team, Neighbourhoods team, Early Years and Public Health. The interests of these partners are often qualitatively different – they may all support broadly similar aims outcomes but the way they work towards them and the flexibilities and restrictions they work with, may well differ. One respondent (outside the council) noted concern for Natural Neighbours, suggesting that one part of the council is pushing them forward and another part is holding them back. Certainly, the long lead in times required for planning and other permissions to make any changes to green space has been testing to the timeline of the project.

Correspondingly, the Natural Neighbours project brings challenges for public sector partners, around for example, sustainability and accountability. Natural Neighbour funds for capital works (around £10,000) is small and a one off. This raises concerns for agencies that are operating on ever reducing funding levels and the need to consider the sustainability of activities and ongoing maintenance costs associated with green space improvements. In terms of accountability, all capital works were to be approved by RMBC as the landowner and despite frustrations from both parties about the process of working through this, it has happened. Accountabilities have been more complicated where Natural Neighbours has been delivering at a neighbourhood level but has not been represented in strategic council structures – council officers have occasionally found themselves being held internally accountable for a project which they do not deliver.

Nevertheless, effective working relationships at both strategic and operational levels have been built and are being furthered through recent land management and nature recovery projects. The Green Spaces team believes that its role in the Natural Neighbours project illustrated shared aims around improving the lives of Rotherham residents and increasing biodiversity. In practice, this means that some of the workload can be shared between Natural Neighbours and RMBC as illustrated in the community tree planting day at Winterhills and consequent tree planting at Eldon Road rec. The value to the council of Natural Neighbours ability to engage residents was also evident at a Sandhill Park family event in July 2022. Officers from the Neighbourhoods team were able to use this event (which attracted around 50 adults and children) to consult on play equipment proposals.

One RMBC officer described 88% of the Natural Neighbours project as community development – bringing people together to improve where they live - and reflected that this particularly adds value in communities such as Eastwood and Canklow.

3 Process and outcomes

It is a privilege to be able to look back over several years of project development and to reflect on progress over time rather than rely on a snapshot picture at the end. Learning from the evaluation therefore includes an assessment of what has enabled progress and what has hindered or got in the way.

Enablers

Time

Natural Neighbours was funded as a five-year project. This is a significant amount of time, allowing for the building of meaningful relationships with communities and agency partners to aid project delivery.

The approach

The project approach has been informed by an understanding that communities have different starting points and this should be reflected in prioritising who to work with, in what way and for how long. The slowly-slowly community building approach helped to build relationships and trust with communities that are often marginalised in local initiatives. As one respondent noted: *“The approach was gentle and highlighted resilience and resourcefulness in the community in bucketfuls”*. Outdoor activities have engaged children and their families in all four green spaces with one resident commenting. Indeed, a focus on engaging children has proved a successful way in to communities and popular with residents. One respondent noted that working with children is a good approach to engaging communities in big environmental issues as *“they are enthusiastic, and not biased nor political”*. A local resident concurred *“Kids really like doing things with Natural Neighbours and want to know when they are coming back. Has encouraged more people to use the area”*.

Interested residents and volunteers

Collaboration with communities has always been the aim of this project and so connections with passionate individuals as well as community groups always helps. This includes people the project has come across just by being in the spaces from the dog walkers at Winterhills and Sandhill Park to the ‘butterfly man’ and families keen to engage with nature at Boston Park. Some of these people have not actively engaged in volunteering but regular contact has been a means to check out ideas and progress. Going further are those individuals who have given their time to volunteering with the project because they want to keep active and have an interest in nature and biodiversity.

Partnership working

As outlined above, a close working relationship with CLP was instrumental in understanding, and making inroads into, the Roma community in Eastwood Village. Beyond this, joint working has been established with many organisations including RMBC which have helped the project progress and will leave a legacy for future projects.

The team

Natural Neighbours has benefited from a skilful team. Project workers have managed to break down barriers with communities that many agencies find difficult to engage. Residents and other

stakeholders have commented on their professionalism and the way that they have connected with children, for example, showing “*patience to work with challenging children*”, “*the activities were pitched well*”, “*their manner and whole demeanour worked well with the community*” (various respondents).

Flexibility

The team’s review of its aims for the period of the lockdown and the re-profiling of its timeline of activities illustrate a flexible and robust approach to meeting the overall project outcomes despite the challenging circumstances. Staff rallied to keep the project going, adapted activities and created new opportunities to engage people in nature. This included collaborating with the Refugee Council and designing safe outdoor exploratory walks which informed later work in the project and led to later SRWT projects. In addition, the team has recognised that attracting people to use outdoor spaces requires a variety of approaches, and these don’t always start with nature. The addition of a music workshop at Eldon Road rec fun day for example, enabled a group of Sudanese women to make the space their own through music making.

Benefits of being part of a bigger organisation

Natural Neighbours has been able to draw on the capacity and different skills of colleagues within the Trust. This has added value to the project, and has helped with outdoor learning opportunities, physical landscaping and the design of management plans and interpretation boards. Equally, knowledge and experience within the Natural Neighbours project has proved useful in informing new SRWT projects. In addition, some of these new projects will create sustainability for initiatives started by Natural Neighbours.

Hurdles

Contested spaces

Communities are not homogeneous and hold a series of competing tensions which can rise to the surface through projects such as this. Different interests and agendas compete in the face of selecting priorities within the context of limited resources. This has been apparent in all four green spaces and highlights the complexity of the work of the project and the **time** required to mediate and find accepted ways forward. Natural Neighbours could have taken easy options by just working with those who already had an interest in the green spaces and/or were easy to engage but this would have missed the point. Involvement of the parks’ neighbours has not been straightforward therefore². As a RMBC officer reflected: “*People should not underestimate how difficult it is to do engagement with the Roma community in Eastwood*”.

Covid-19

The pandemic interrupted the projected timeline and halted community engagement and relationship building. Where relationships already existed, some work continued but it proved

² This understanding is backed up by the Orval analysis (Garip, G. 2020 *ibid*) which found that white people are 1.8 times more likely to use recreation sites compared to a Black person, while the richest socio-economic groups were 1.6 times more likely to make the most of spaces compared to those at the bottom of the income spectrum.

extremely difficult to keep up momentum in Eastwood and Boston Park or indeed get started as planned in Winterhills and Sandhill Park. The project effectively lost fifteen months and this has impacted on process, outputs and outcomes. Challenges included:

- getting used to working from home for a team of people whose work is focused on outdoor activity
- understanding what was and wasn't possible with regards to staff activity within the safety guidelines of the Trust
- understanding and creating policies and procedures regarding safeguarding responsibilities for children engaging in social media-based (as opposed to face to face) activities
- being a second-tier organisation and therefore one step removed from direct community response i.e., not frontline or locally based
- reluctance on the part of families to use green spaces for fear of hostile perceptions from neighbours regarding government guidance and what is deemed appropriate
- furloughing of colleagues
- communicating with families for whom English isn't their first, or even, second language

Administration and bureaucracy

Throughout, the project has been challenged by regulation and slower than anticipated responses and decision-making. Project workers have spent a lot of time chasing contractors, getting approval for signage etc. One stakeholder organisation reflected that, *"the space is difficult because governed by a lot of council red tape, it's flattening and this must be hard"*.

A lack of consistency across the project team

The project has had a number of workers during its lifetime, sometimes by design and sometimes by circumstance. Rather than recruit a project team at the start, work was carried out by staff from other SRWT teams along with sessional workers. The addition of permanent project staff to work with the project officer in 2018 and again in 2020 made a difference, but to the outside world there appeared to be different faces, and different approaches, coming in and out which has affected relationships on the ground.

Seasonal timings

Some environmental work can only be carried out at certain times of year, such as tree and wildflower planting, due to bird nesting season. This is outside the project's control. The catch up driven by a changing timeline due to Covid-19, has led to required tasks being out of sync with nature, risking non completion of delivery plans, and has occasionally paused volunteering opportunities with a potential loss of volunteer retention. (The six month extension should help to ensure completion of tasks however.)

Outcomes

The evaluation aims to assess progress towards the stated outcomes in the project funding application as well as outcomes identified through a participative theory of change workshop involving a range of stakeholders (including residents) and early interviews. A framework bringing together all this information, attached in Appendix B, informed the evaluation process.

Quantitative findings are, in the main, not appropriate at this point as the project now has an extension until March 2023 and numbers will change. The findings in this evaluation are therefore primarily qualitative, based on xxx interviews and observation throughout a period of just over three years. There are trends however. In some cases the anticipated targets have already been exceeded whereas in a few cases the evidence to date indicates that targets are either not measurable or outputs are not likely to be achieved.

Findings with regard to high level outcomes

The case studies in Part 2 include the specific impact of the project in each of the four sites but the findings also point to broader learning in relation to outcomes across the project.

High level outcomes and evidence to date:

High level outcomes

- Local pride will be improved
- More positive attitudes /change in perception of green spaces
- Increased community cohesion
- Local people will gain skills to take ownership of their local community greenspaces
- People will have improved health and wellbeing
- Access to local greenspace is improved
- People see the spaces as an asset and develop new projects
- People feel safe when using the greenspace
- More people enjoy a more biodiverse and healthier urban environment

Support and encouragement for **local people to take part in volunteering and activity days** has been very successful, though the evidence points to a more nuanced understanding of what might be classed as volunteering. Regular volunteers, albeit in lower numbers than hoped for, have helped improve the green spaces at Boston Park and at Winterhills but the same approach has not been so successful at Sandhill or at Eldon Road. There are several observations about why this might be: the pandemic held up the creation of volunteer workdays and delayed all project activity at Sandhill; volunteering is not a familiar concept to members of the Roma community who live around Eldon Road rec. However, the project has found that volunteering works best when it works with specific groups e.g., through CLP, or with the fire cadets who have volunteered on several of the sites. On the other hand, one off targeted activities have worked well, as evidenced by all the families that helped with tree planting at Winterhills, and the primary school children who helped with tree planting at Eldon Road rec.

There is a tendency for **local people to feel more positive about their community or neighbourhood** the more they get to know it and engage in local activities. One volunteer was very positive about his involvement and proud of the results: *“I’m really impressed with the difference that we have made to the paths in the park. I really notice the difference when I walk around the park”*.

The celebration events at Boston and Sandhill parks in July 2022 were testimony to the **pride and positive attitudes** residents have in these spaces. After seeing the film about Sandhill Park, one resident asked when it could be shared as allowed to share with people, to *“show them all good stuff happening in park”*, and the families who relayed gazebos and equipment uphill on a rainy day for an event at Boston Park illustrated their enthusiasm and sense of ownership of the space. At Eldon Rd, the children and their schools have taken some **ownership**, with one school naming each tree. Many, many participants have expressed how good they felt at the end of an activity and how they were looking forward to the next one.

Cohesion is about breaking down barriers and making connections. An RMBC officer noted that Boston Park is bordered by two very different communities and that it has been *“interesting to see them come together as one group to discuss how they want to see the site”* through the Natural Neighbours project.

There are many examples of **children and adults taking part in outdoor and physical activity** in each site through events such as Creature Counts, Christmas walks and wreath making. In addition, the lockdown activities for families proved popular in Canklow and provided an opportunity for families to do something purposeful outdoors. **More people have used, and are using, the spaces**, and in different ways. The environmental and adventure activities proved very popular with boys in Eastwood Village and young people in Canklow have a much greater awareness of what is on their doorstep. A teacher at a school near to Eldon Road rec pointed out that children are unlikely to just go for a walk by the canal but presenting outdoor activity as an experience is what works in engaging children in wildlife. Similarly, it was a music workshop tent that attracted a large group of Sudanese women and their children to Eldon Road rec – they used the space to make music. Although there are no figures to demonstrate footfall, people have talked about how they are using the parks more. One resident talked about how having been introduced to Winterhills she now planned to explore more of the space with her family. The family picnic at Sandhill Park attracted many people who previously did not know the park even existed and said they would be back, including a group of parents who were so impressed they visited another site the following day.

Local people have gained new skills in tree planting, wildflower meadow creation and through volunteering with SRWT’s Land Team to create paths and lay steps. Children have learnt to spot species of trees and wildlife, and have had a go at safe fire lighting, den building, sawing, making bird boxes and wayfinding signs. The challenge to Natural Neighbours has been running and recruiting to certificated courses. It has proved very difficult to engage residents in training opportunities both for in practical skills such as first aid and in courses more closely related to the environment and community leadership. It became apparent fairly early on in the project that in communities such as Eastwood and Canklow, many people require support to take up training

opportunities – confidence building, childcare, dealing with family issues etc. The project did not have the capacity to provide this. In addition, they were only able to recruit to one accredited outdoor learning course. Those that participated enjoyed and benefited from the training (see p.9 above), but the pandemic and ongoing COVID-19 infections and consequent staff shortages, combined with too short lead in times to get the training into people’s diaries, meant that only one course took place.

An issue identified in all four sites was poor signage, inaccessible routes and information about the space. Paths have been/ will be cleared and recreated at Boston Park and Sandhill Park and a new path is being created at Eldon Road rec, steps to aid access have been installed at Winterhills and Boston Park, wayfinding signs and arrows are being installed and interpretation boards have been made for all the green spaces, thus ensuring **improved access, signage and information**. The extension of the project will enable more work to make the spaces accessible and useable.

All four spaces will have **more biodiversity** as a result of the work carried out, for example, tree planting, clearing of overgrown shrubbery and meadows creation.

Added value and unanticipated outcomes

The Natural Neighbours project has created opportunities that could not have been envisaged at its inception. These include benefits to partner agencies such as financial support to Casting Innovations, the opening up of project possibilities for refugees and asylum seekers through joint work with the Refugee Council, and improved links between RMBC officers and members and communities: *“We have always managed to link with the school and a sprinkling of residents but they have improved this”* (officer talking about the work at Winterhills).

The project has informed other SRWT projects taking place in Rotherham and provided access to communities where relationships have been built over time. For example, Natural Neighbours brokered the hosting of artist-led workshops with Canklow residents at Castings on behalf of the Trust’s Hydrospheres project. In Eastwood, the activities with Roma boys led to a successful funding bid with CLP for the Eastwood Eco-warriors project which created. Anew adventure playground alongside Eldon Road rec. In addition, there has been over the last five years or so, a greater recognition of the necessity of small grassroots approaches to environmental activism. The national network of wildlife trusts announced a new Nextdoor Nature programme in 2022 with funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund. This programme is supporting a community organising approach to community engagement, new to many trusts but familiar to SRWT through its approach to Natural Neighbours and the experience it holds. It will enable the Trust to continue to work in three of the four project sites for a further two years.

4 Learning

This project has taken a more people focused approach than many other projects in the conservation sector. Natural Neighbours has reached out into communities that are less likely to be engaged in the natural environment. This targeted approach, described as 'brave' by one interviewee has demonstrated the value of working in this way, and its challenges. The factors helping (time, the approach, interested residents and volunteers, partnership working, the team, flexibility, benefits of being based in a bigger organisation) and hindering (contested spaces, Covid:19, administration and bureaucracy, a lack of consistency across the project team, seasonal timings) this approach are outlined in section 3 above. Some of these enablers and hurdles are dichotomous. For example, a five-year project timeline is a help – there would have been fewer positive outcomes had this been a three-year project. On the other hand, the timespan has seemed short for such complex community centric work, particularly in an area like Eastwood and bearing in mind unforeseen circumstances such as the pandemic.

Additional learning, based on hindsight and reflections, includes

- The community-based approach has worked well though might have been even better if there had been **a community informed plan of action from the start of the project**. Natural Neighbours took a strategic approach to the 5-year project, recognizing that some areas would require a higher level of investment (time and skills) than others. This could have been enhanced however with more intensive foundation community work such as stakeholder/power mapping with partner agencies and communities to better understand the different interests in each the sites and the resources available (people and money and time).
- The mapping activity described above may have provided a more detailed and **nuanced picture of the many different communities** with a potential interest in the greenspaces. For example, some respondents have pointed out that there are marginalized sections of the community around Eldon Road rec and Winterhills that have not been engaged, and that working with a more diverse audience would enhance ways of working in a sector which is sometimes perceived as middle class and risk averse.
- Making time for frequent **reflection** on the purpose of the project is important as new opportunities and/or sway by partner agencies can divert from the intended model and approach, and stretch the project's capacity.
- A **local base** was offered to the project both by RMBC and by CLP, but not taken up. Several respondents have commented that not having a desk presence in Rotherham has had implications for relationships and consequent practice. At least one of these offers is still on the table for the remainder of the project.
- Natural Neighbours aimed to co-produce ideas, delivery and outcomes. In addition, staff participation in community organiser training informed the way that the project worked; as one worker reflected: *"community organizing gave structure and shape and vocabulary to*

the work". Articulating **this process** to help others (internally in the Trust and externally with partners and funders) understand what is involved could usefully inform future developments.

- It has taken some time to get to the design and finalising of the management plans. For some people there is a sense that there has been too much talking and too little action. Rolling communications with communities around the direction of the project, the purpose of the process and timelines can make a difference to this perception, as can small changes or **quick wins** throughout the project.
- Relationships take time to build, and **communications** have been more effective in the last year of the project: *"we have worked out how to work together better"* (RMBC officer). Differences in agendas and ways of working are not necessarily explicit and there appear to have been occasional misunderstandings between partner organisations and Natural Neighbours in both directions about how their organisations and structures work. One RMBC officer suggested that they just needed to sit down together a bit more regularly and to make space for more informal conversations. Online communications also require investment. Recent **social media** promotion through 'boosting' events brought in a broader range of participants than had previously been the case.
- The significance of **continuity** has become apparent through this project. Continuity in terms of frequency and regularity e.g. the importance of maintaining a presence in communities rather than dropping in and out, and in terms of approach e.g. ensuring that the style of interaction and community involvement follows through from one intervention to another.
- Finally, however well planned, projects need to be **fluid and dynamic**. People – residents, volunteers and paid workers - move on and change. Community demographics change, for example new housebuilding at Sandhill may well have an effect on who uses the park and how they want to use it. Strategies change as evidenced by recent government funding which has made possible improvements to Eldon Road rec. And of course, no one would have precited the pandemic and its effect on people and the project.

The Natural Neighbours project has been a bold approach to engage communities in making use of and looking after green spaces on their doorsteps. It was never going to be an easy project and the projected outcomes were always going to be challenging in some of the targeted neighbourhoods. Traditional models of volunteering have little relevance to many people living in places like Canklow and Eastwood and different approaches to engaging people in nature are needed. As one person put it, *"volunteers have needs that need to be met. ... these are families that can't feed their children, so why would they want to volunteer. It is patronising to suggest they plant a tree"*. This project has demonstrated alternative ways of involving people, methods that might not lead to a direct correlation with funding targets but which have the potential to make a qualitative difference to community identities of place and space.

PART 2

Case Studies

Boston Park case study – short film available here

The site

Boston Park was Rotherham's first public park, and was opened in 1876. It covers just over eight hectares. The top end is situated at the end of Boston Castle Grove and at the bottom borders Canklow. At the side of the park is Canklow Woods, an ancient woodland area which was bought by RMBC in 2000 with heritage Lottery Fund support.

People talk about Boston Park as a huge asset – an ancient woodland with a rich history - but which is underused. At the start of the Natural Neighbours project, it appeared to be mostly used by dog walkers, students and others cutting through between Moorgate and Canklow, young people gathering together (in and outside school hours) and some rough sleepers. There was some evidence of families using the park as a positive nature experience - they liked the wildness of it, but generally the park was not only underused but also undervalued. Boston Park had been neglected and become very overgrown, with paths unpassable in some places. The Natural Neighbours project was initially focused on one small part of Boston Park – the Dell area, a sunken garden based on the site of an old quarry which is near the top of the park. However, engagement with residents from Canklow found that walking routes into and up through the park, for leisure activities or as school routes, were difficult and underused, and so wider park access and usage have also been focal points of the work.

Community perspectives

Key issues identified at the start of the project included dog fouling, litter, needles/broken glass, unsafe footpaths in woods and dangerous underfoot. People said they felt unsafe. Proposals for improvement were around better signage to and throughout the park, people using the space and taking some ownership of it, more organisations including schools using the space to run activities, and safer, solid footpaths.

The Natural Neighbours project has worked with three key community groups as well as informal groups of volunteers, The Friends of Boston Castle and Parklands, Canklow Rainbow Kids Club and Canklow Kidz. In 2019, the Friends' Group expressed a lot of love for the park and for the Dell area (see film) and whilst acknowledging that it needed clearing so that a walkway into it could be reinstated and it could be better used, they did not want much change. They liked the wildness of it. *It's a really lovely area* (local resident). Not everyone however, knew that the Dell existed. It isn't on the main path and felt a bit off limits, especially to the Canklow community. One resident said, *"Live very near to Boston Park but don't go there much apart from walking through to Oakwood School"*. These residents suggested a need for better paths to get up there and more light through the trees as it felt *"a bit scary and very dark"*.

Natural Neighbours project activity

Discussions were held with representatives of the Friends Group and a relationship was built with the Rainbow Kids Club. Project workers organised outdoor sessions with the Kids Club, gradually taking the children further and further up into the park and showed them how to use and look after the space. Activities included survival skills, den building, fire building, bramble picking, games etc. They also did some litter picks with the children who reported that their efforts led to less litter

being dropped as a result. Feedback from Canklow families was very positive, with one young person describing the activities as 'life-changing'. Others commented:

"Got all of your senses going, bug catching was great they loved that, litter picking, it really made a difference, ..., stopped people doing it more, good for local people to see. Would like more ...plus) camera traps' ... Rekindled my youth" (parent of child).

"Teaches you life skills, really useful to know how to do stuff like that and look after a place. It was all really good. Loved dens ... making the community a better place, going out and doing new things" (young person)

"It's a more fun place, there's more things in it I've found now" (child)

"I think more about looking after the environment now and caring about Nature" (child)

Inevitably, the pandemic put a stop to much of this activity in 2020. Instead, project staff distributed children's activity packs, and posted online films about nature trails, left clues for treasure hunts and instructions for den making, and provided tree slices for people to decorate and hang on a tree with messages of support. Families were encouraged to participate in their own time. One resident has talked about how they took about 10 children up through Boston Park at this time:

"Their faces really enjoyed it. There were signs with things to do, this was really good. Made some dens. A nice walk up there Real good seeing them make dens and hanging things on trees. They had to look for treasure and then bury it again. They said 'it's right good this isn't it?' The older kids have gone up there themselves since".



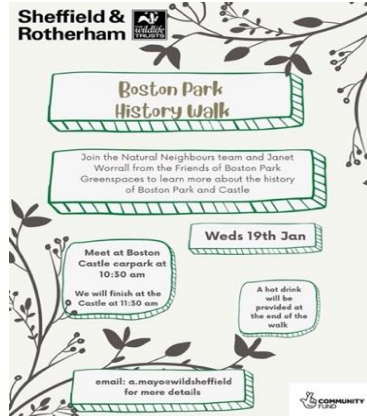
Lockdown activity - tree decoration



Lockdown activity - den making

Plans to catch up on lost time in 2020 were difficult to materialise. Some things got going again in 2021 but it was in fits and starts as lockdowns came and went. At this time though, there was also interest from South Yorkshire Housing Association, who were running a pilot project around the environment and greenspaces in Canklow. Natural neighbours and SYHA jointly arranged an online workshop to identify community priorities. Unfortunately, few residents attended though the housing association passed on information it was gathering from its tenants.

Nevertheless, some things did normalise in 2021 and Natural Neighbours nature and consultation walks were organised as well as an outdoor workshop which brought together residents from both the top and the bottom of the park. Throughout, project workers have continued to engage people in using the space through school holiday activities, bat walks and a history walk led by a local resident.



Comments from 'walk and talk' participants included:

"I thoroughly enjoyed the walk and found areas of discussion most interesting and in some cases illuminating"

"Encouraged by some of the ideas coming from the group"

"More positive about the park's future if organisations like yours are involved"

"I think it was lovely chance to get to know the woods and what we can do with the kids"

Building on residents' priorities for the area, Natural Neighbours liaised with council officers and produced a management plan for the park. Community feedback had centred on access routes, getting lost in the park, and the paths being muddy and inaccessible. So, the plan focused on making the paths easier to navigate with wayfinding routes and clear pathways for primary and secondary school pupils. Natural Neighbours promoted volunteer workdays to cut back and clear access routes through the park, including discovery of paths from an old map. This work culminated in the Wildlife Trust putting in new steps to the Dell.



Volunteers at Boston Park

A partnership with a local social enterprise, Casting Innovations, led to community production of bat and bird boxes, and wayfinding signs. Residents were invited to get involved in the repurposing and recycling of wood for boxes and signs at weekly joinery sessions.



Impact

Boston Park was always going to be a tricky project. It is a very large area bordered by two very different communities, communities that potentially have diverse interests and ideals for one common space. One local stakeholder stressed how Natural Neighbours was “a brave project because ... Canklow is renowned for being very insular and outsiders not often welcomed” but that they liked the Natural Neighbours approach in terms of how it related what they were doing to the outcomes they were trying to achieve: “Can see the connection here – the engagement. They all know the park etc but this is something different and positive”. A RMBC officer concurred: “At Boston Park, engagement with communities has gone well – the walk and talks for example. There has been a good relationship with children through the kids’ clubs and with Casting Innovations”.

Positive attitudes and community pride: A community leader from Canklow confirmed that people feel more positive about the area because “they see the project happening, they see the volunteers ... this shows they want the space to look good”. For some residents, it has taken a long time to reach the point where it is now, (“a lot of talking”) but they are proud of what they have achieved and the improvements made.

Cohesion: Natural Neighbours has been adept at working with residents from the top of the park, and with residents from Canklow at the bottom, and in bringing them together.

Access to green spaces: The work of volunteers in clearing brambles and overgrowth has made huge differences to routes through this greenspace. One of Boston Park’s regular volunteers noted that school children were walking to school more now through the woods as paths have become more accessible and another noted that dog walkers are now taking new routes and this increased footfall is keeping the paths clear. The steps into the dell area enable many people to go into this space for the first time.



Local people have gained new skills: three adults from the two children’s clubs in Canklow participated in six training sessions on environmental play and received packs to use themselves. One participant reflected: *Be very interested in getting more training and in helping ... to get park improved with people having a say* Children and young people have also shown enthusiasm for learning new skills – the workshops at Casting Innovations have enthused and engaged teenagers as well as young children.

Biodiversity: already cutting back of overgrowth has revealed shrubs and trees that had been starved of light. Apple trees (now complete with many apples), rhododendrons and other flora can now grow in a more healthy environment.

Volunteers: The volunteer work has definitely made a difference, as one volunteer stated: “The transformation we have made in the dell is remarkable. It was unpassable when first went in there”.

Partnership working: very effective joint working with Casting Innovations.

Eldon Road Recreation Ground case study – short film available here

The site

Eldon Road Recreation Ground is in Eastwood, a neighbourhood just east of, and adjoining, Rotherham town centre. It is bordered on one side by housing, a school and a key project partner, Clifton Learning Partnership (CLP). The River Don runs along the opposite side with a pedestrian bailey bridge leading to a retail park. The site includes a multi-use games area and football pitches. It is also used by dog walkers. It does however have a reputation as a place for drinkers and drug users, and litter and fly-tipping have been ongoing issues.

Eastwood Village is a multi-ethnic area with much private rented terraced housing and has seen successive turnovers of communities – it is currently home to many Roma families. In 2016, Rotherham Council created the Eastwood Deal to focus on tackling anti-social behaviour and responding to environmental concerns. This has evolved into a multi-agency approach which tackles a range of locally identified issues such as improving housing, health and wellbeing and employment opportunities.

Natural Neighbours, (along with strategic partners), saw this site as a challenging area in terms of community engagement and generating community ownership of the space, and therefore prioritised it as the first of its four projects.

Community perspectives

In 2019, residents talked about the wildlife and the potential of attracting more birds in particular. It was also felt that it could be better used for sports activities. Several people mentioned the need to clear the shrubbery by the river and asked for better lighting, as this would make it feel like a safer space. Several people suggested better pathways e.g. to the bridge to Parkgate and that if the path went right round the park, people would walk their dogs more and the park would be better used. It was however, been difficult to engage the Roma community and to hear about their aspirations for the space.

Natural Neighbours project activity

The work here can be clearly differentiated into pre and post pandemic.

In the first year of the project, SRWT ran a few one-off activities, often using sessional staff. Once in post, Natural Neighbours project staff invested time getting to know local residents and key workers in Eastwood Village through frequenting the community café at CLP, attending meetings of agencies working in the area, and helping out with a regular litter picking group. The location of CLP, next to the recreation ground, meant that it had a vested interest in the use of Eldon Road Recreation Ground. It has been a key partner and directed the focus of the early work here. Together, Natural Neighbours and CLP identified opportunities for new outdoor learning provision primarily for boys from the Roma



Den making

community. Regular after school sessions offered the boys opportunities to have fun and discover the green space on their doorsteps, to learn about its wildlife and to develop knowledge and skills through engaging in environmental and adventure activities such as den building, knife carving and fire making.

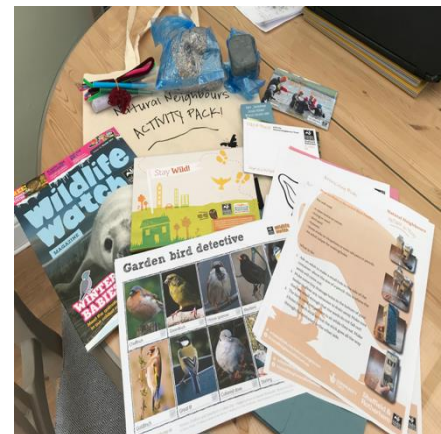
The boys were allowed to manage their own risk and to be active outside which seemed a particularly good fit with the interests of the Roma community which brings with it a lot of outdoor skills. The success of this approach can be measured through the number of boys participating in weekly sessions which outstripped people's expectations. One stakeholder commented upon how the approach and style of the Natural Neighbours team worked well with the community and built trusting relationships - making their presence familiar to residents in a gentle and understated way. This early work led to SRWT partnering with CLP to secure funds for a playground, next to the CLP centre on the edge of the park. This project saw SRWT working with local young people to build a playground. It was hoped that the relationships with young people might pave the way for a youth led steering group for the Natural Neighbours project but it was not to be. The pandemic interrupted this work and it has not fully recovered.



Bug hunting

A draft management plan for the green space was informed by Informal drop-in work along with consultation activities at local fun days, a community visit to another park to stimulate ideas, and contact with boys and their families.

The pandemic however, brought many of the above activities to a standstill. Continuing engagement with the Roma community through social media for example, was almost impossible. Natural Neighbours created children's activity packs which were distributed by CLP and the council's 'Early Help' programme in 2020 and in summer 2021 they organised a bug hunt. But it was difficult to do much more. As and when lockdowns eased, the Natural Neighbours project team returned to Eastwood but with less time available than prior to the pandemic as they had to move quickly to ensure they could cover all four sites before the project end.



Lockdown activity pack

The project has since continued to do some work with CLP, for example, young people's environmental and meadow planting activities in May 2022, and has worked more closely with the three local primary schools in the area.

In total, 345 school children have taken part in facilitating outdoor adventure and environmental experiences. Feedback from teachers and volunteers included how the sessions were well pitched and really engaged the children, broadening their awareness of the green space around them. These have been welcomed with one headteacher very positive about how the values of looking after your

neighbourhood and environment fit well into the school curriculum. For example, Year 4 groups (many of whom had never been to the playing fields before) engaged in a six week project about Eldon Rd and making it better for nature, inspired by work done with Natural Neighbours. At the end, they invited Natural Neighbours to an event where they presented 20 bird boxes made by the two classes. The tree planting and meadow creation project where some pupils named the trees and helped to plant bulbs around them illustrated the value of different partners working together with Natural Neighbours - RMBC Green Spaces team, Fire Cadet volunteers, CLP and three local schools. The response from all involved has been very positive:



"I'm having the best time doing this" (Year 4 pupil).

"I see this park like my back garden, I love looking at out over it, at all the nature. It's great to see someone doing something to make it better for nature. I saw you out planting trees and I thought that's great" (local resident).

"Absolutely brilliant, ... Absolutely brilliant that got the community involved in what is a beautiful and an underrated green space. ... The project seems to be doing what they hoped it would. Want to try and raise awareness about what is going on" (local councillor).

"Going really well – good to see how happy the kids were getting involved in the tree planting. It's brilliant, exactly what everyone needs" (RMBC officer).

Indeed, the Green Spaces team has been very positive about greater community involvement. Their main concern was to have clearer objectives for Eldon Road Recreation Ground based on a better understanding of how the local Roma community sees the space: *"The kids and the schools taking ownership, the tree names, helps with public perception and putting a positive perception of the tree planting. Signs have now gone up – can tell people looking after them. People all know kids at the schools and that helps, especially in a area that is high risk for vandalism".*



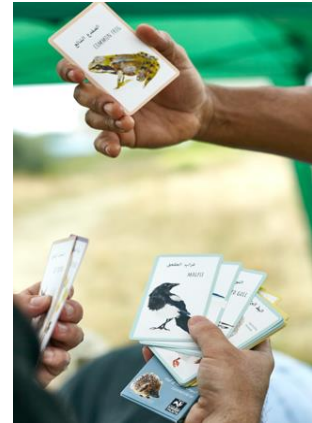
Rotherham Advertiser 14.03.22

Impact

This has always been a challenging green space and raises questions about whether the project outcomes were ever possible in an area like Eastwood within the timeframe. There are ongoing negative comments from some residents about nefarious activities on the recreation ground and there is much more work to be done if all the communities of Eastwood are to feel safe here and proud of a potentially great asset on their doorsteps. However,

Positive attitudes and community pride: One local stakeholder has reflected on how a real legacy has been embedded in the community, primarily through the sense of self-worth that the boys felt in achieving outdoor environmental tasks.

Most recently, at a family fun day in July 2022, a local and long time resident commented that Eldon Road rec is *“Much better than it was 100% better. ... Really pleased with what they are doing with this area. Like to see children taking an interest. All for it. Been lovely to see it develop”*. And a young person talked about feeling *“Happy, proud to show people how is Eastwood”*



Multi language wildlife cards

Local people have gained new skills: there have been lots of opportunities for children and young people to be involved in environmental activities, from wildlife spotting to fire making to tree and bulb planting. There is evidence that these have improved knowledge and enhanced existing skills.

Access to green spaces: there is anecdotal evidence that more people are using the playing fields, and one young person said they valued the space for sitting, talking, playing and singing. The extent to which there is increased use is difficult to quantify though the Natural Neighbours project has enabled local communities to use the space in different ways. At the family fun day in July 2022 for example, a group of women clearly enjoyed having an outdoor space where they could play music and sing.



Effective partnership working: the early relationship with CLP was invaluable in getting to know the local community and attracting involvement in youth activities. Natural Neighbours has been involved in the Eastwood multi-agency group, leading one RMBC officer to comment that the project had given a bit of impetus to work in the space (2020). Later, joint work with the three primary schools provided mutual benefit – it enabled Natural Neighbours to re-establish its presence post pandemic, and inspired children and the schools to engage more with nature.

In addition, Natural Neighbours management plan for Eldon Road rec has been used to inform council development (through the council’s Towns Fund team). This is picking up on the project’s early consultations and will help to make real residents’ vision for a path to link with the bridge that goes to the retail park.

Sandhill Park Case Study – short film available here

The site

Sandhill Park is tucked away on the edge of a housing estate in Rawmarsh, north of Rotherham town centre. It includes a flat open recreation space, a children's small playpark, woods, streams and nature trails. Nature trails leads to Kilnhurst and Swinton, and were signposted though the signs had been shot at and unreadable. In 2020, RMBC noted that Sandhill Park and the surrounding greenspace was important for habitat and diversity, but that it was a difficult site because of its location with little housing around its boundaries and therefore no natural surveillance; it was an ill-defined space with no clear purpose; and that it looked shabby – damaged signage, some flytipping and littering, and a playpark in need of restoration.

This was the last site to come onstream within the Natural Neighbours project.

Community perspectives

Views were gathered from dog walkers who are frequent park users, people engaging in consultation activities and volunteers involved in litter picking and the Friends of Rawmarsh and Parkgate Greenspaces group. Many of the park users talked about using the trails to get somewhere e.g. to Kilnhurst; some incorporated the park in longer walks, and many valued the birds, butterflies and other wildlife. There was some consensus that not a lot should be done to the space – people liked the fact that the space hadn't changed. Aspirations were therefore low-key but included more/better equipment for small children, litter management, better access along the overgrown and muddy paths, picnic benches and relaxing the grass mowing to create wildflower meadows.

The one bone of contention was the use of the greenspace by quad bikers and the fact that they were cutting back / sawing down trees to make new trails, although a local resident pointed out that off-road bikes had been here for at least 40 years (they had ridden there themselves in their youth) and they couldn't see this changing.

Natural Neighbours project activity

As this was the last of the four sites, and because of the pandemic, time has been short here. However, a RMBC public health consultation project also identified Sandhill Park as a potential area for investment. Natural Neighbours was able to work alongside the public health *Moving in Nature* project in spring 2021 thus maximising opportunities to engage families in activities and talk to people using the park. Unfortunately, *Moving in Nature* was not successful in attracting further funding but the spring activities proved to be a useful launch of Natural Neighbours' activity in Sandhill.

Overall however, patience and perseverance have been necessary to engage local people in planning park improvements at Sandhill. The project hired a school hall for a consultation event – no one came, it set up stalls in the primary school to encourage families to come to activities in the park but there was little enthusiasm. A project worker reflected that: *“Generally, it seems, people are keen to see people doing stuff in the park but not doing a lot themselves”*. Undeterred however, the project then then flyered 150 houses with the times that project workers would be in the park. This

produced some interest, including a Fire Cadets leader who offered Natural Neighbours some young volunteers across the four sites.



Facebook, February 1st 2022: Fantastic work at Sandhill Park from a group of local Fire Cadets who gave up their Saturday morning to clear lots of spiky scrub and litter pick the playing field area.

During 2021 and early 2022, Natural Neighbours organised walkabouts in the green space and further engagement activities to encourage families to try out new things. These included making bird feeders and mini beast hotels and walks they wouldn't normally do, as well as a Christmas wreath making activity in December 2021 where people foraged for supplies and interacted with nature in a way new to them at this time of year. One family commented that, *"It's nice to come somewhere different and try something new outside in the half terms- we've come again as we enjoyed the last one"*. The engagement activities were advertised through social media and strikingly attracted some Rawmarsh residents who had never heard of, and never been to, Sandhill Park before.



Making journey sticks

Sandhill Park not only had the least development time, it also had a lower project budget. The community feedback led to a draft management plan and discussions about potential park improvements with RMBC councillors and neighbourhood officers. Consultations with park users had highlighted there were no benches in Sandhill Park and a need for improved signage at the main park entrance. RMBC officers responded quickly with a better welcoming sign and a bench near the playground in early 2021; (The Natural Neighbours team heard comments from residents that they were happy to finally have a bench but didn't know where it had come from).

One of the bigger changes in the plan was to do something about the surfacing of the path around the nature reserve. Lots of people visit but only use the amenity area because the trail is muddy and slippery. There was also a desire to widen the path so that people could cycle around it. In a perfect

world the path, which is a public right of way, would need around 250 metres of surfacing but the money available meant only a fraction of this could be done. It is hoped that future housing developments will generate some funds which the council will prioritise for continuation of the path. Other improvements identified were facilities for children, way findings, attracting wildlife and community safety. The RMBC Neighbourhoods Team felt that there were some pieces of work that they could potentially contribute to and local councillors agreed to improve some of the facilities for children in the playpark to complement the Natural Neighbours focus on access and wildlife. A Natural Neighbours event in July 2022 provided an opportunity for council officers to consult with children about the type of equipment they would like.

The family fun day in July 2022 at Sandhill Park was very well attended, both by local residents and people travelling from further away. Around 50 people took part in fun environmental activities and stayed for a community picnic. Comments from families included: *“Nice to have stuff happening, rather than just an empty space”* and *“Nice to see the space being used, not abused. Seeing all the families and the activities”*.



One group of people and their children were so

impressed that they attended another fun day at a different park the following day.

Interpretation boards will be installed later in the year to help people navigate the improved circular route through the nature reserve and highlighting the wildlife they might spot. There are still a few niggles about the space, mainly around the play area (e.g. fencing around the play area to make it safe and clean for children to play, and a bench inside this), and the barriers, particularly for parents wanting to use the park (e.g. the gates are not big enough for a double buggy to fit through).

Impact

Natural Neighbours believes that whilst community engagement has been difficult in Sandhill, there is evidence of:

Positive attitudes and community pride: this was in evidence at the Family Fun Day through comments about how families are using the space and their enthusiasm to use the space more.

Access to green spaces: despite the barriers described above, people’s awareness of the park’s presence has increased and there is a corresponding greater use of the space.

Local people gaining new skills: evidence based on feedback from adults and children who participated in the woodland and nature-based activities.

Effective partnership working: there has been a fruitful working relationship between the Natural Neighbours project and RMBC councillors, Neighbourhoods Officers and Park and Green Spaces officers.

It is hoped that the addition of the interpretation boards, wayfinding posts and work to the paths will address some of the concerns about safety and access.

Winterhills case study – short film available here

The site

Formerly spoil heaps, Winterhills is a set of rolling hills north-west of Rotherham town centre and is bordered on one side by houses and on another by a secondary school. This is a countryside/wildlife site, rather than a park although there is small play area. At the bottom end is what are locally known as the Engine Ponds and these have been significantly improved through school volunteers with the support of the RMBC Green Spaces team.

The school's involvement goes back several years through different cohorts of pupils. They have chopping back trees and bushes, litter picked, dredged the ponds, taken out the old decking, and raised money for planting and for a path around the ponds. A group of adult volunteers also help with litter picking and coppicing of shrubs.

At the top of the hills, is a BMX bike track, established many years ago, and refurbished during 2022 by a local community group. A community leader from this group also had close links with schools and young people's projects and engaged them in mural projects at one side of the park over 2021 and 22.

Winterhills was a different proposition to the other three green spaces because the council, the nearby secondary school and community groups had been involved here for several years. Coordination was therefore both a key opportunity and challenge here.

Community perspectives

Winterhills is a well-used site by dog walkers, ramblers and for family picnics in the summer. People value Winterhills for the way it connects up with other local places and green spaces. So a focus was in part about trying to help people move through the space better through improving access, maps and signposting to places they can visit from here as part of a walk, including a map of the sculpture trail. Other suggestions from users included bins, benches, wildflower planting, less council grass mowing, habitat interpretation boards and improved pathways, including stepped access at one entrance which gets muddy. In addition, the small playpark was in need of modernisation and there was an understanding in 2019 that the council had earmarked money for this.

In 2021, RMBC shared plans for tree planting at Winterhills to help with land management and climate control. Local knowledge helped to identify appropriate locations that would not interfere with other community activities.

Natural Neighbours project activity

Winterhills was deemed to need less early investment and while Natural Neighbours built connections with council officers and community stakeholders, more in depth consultation and follow on developments were scheduled for the second half of the project. In the end, the start was later than planned due to COVID-19, leading to a squeeze on the time available for community involvement and engagement.

In 2021, a 'walk and chat' took place followed by community engagement activities at the site and volunteer workdays. Towards the end of this year, the project leafleted nearby houses and held a consultation event in a church hall. 20 residents came along, leading to a draft management plan and a site consultation walk with councillors, officers and community leaders. The site visit was seen to be very useful in terms of understanding the space and the proposed changes, but also in terms of building relationships and seeing the links between the different projects taking place in one greenspace. The involvement of Winterhill School, the BMX group, RMBC Green Spaces and Natural Neighbours, plus other community volunteer groups led one RMBC officer to understand this as *"like a massive project with lots of different partners involved"*. A Natural Neighbours project worker also expressed that: *"All different projects happening, it's really complicated. But going out on site, ... I think really helped to spark a bit of imagination from them and a bit of like, oh, wow, this is what this could be"*. This coming together of initiatives has been seen as a positive with a local councillor posting on social media to express support for residents, the council and Natural neighbours working together. It concluded: *"We seem to be moving closer to one plan and how each group fits into it"*. In addition, a RMBC officer commented: *"The involvement of the Natural Neighbours project has expanded the work already begun at Winterhills"*.

Joint working was evidenced at a tree planting day in February 2022. Natural Neighbours and RMBC Green Spaces team worked in partnership to publicise and involve residents in planting trees and understanding the environment of Winterhills. The result was that despite being a bitterly cold day with intermittent snow, 33 people turned up to plant trees, with several families staying to engage in a Wildlife Trust tree trail. As one parent commented:



"Up for anything that gets people involved in the local community, taking ownership of spaces in the local area. We enjoyed it, a good activity and supports planting trees. Great to have things like this on your doorstep. Would like lots more activities to get people involved".

And a nearby resident walking past noted:

"It's great to see young people out and contributing to the park like we used to when I was young"

Natural Neighbours has also supported regular volunteer days which, with SRWT support, have succeeded in clearing overgrowth, wildflower meadow planting and putting in steps to make a steep and muddy entrance more accessible. In addition, the project helped clear away the debris cleared out of the Engine Ponds. Conservation work is necessarily seasonal and will be resumed later in the year but in the meantime, bird boxes, interpretation boards and wayfinding signs will be installed.



A Family Fun Day in July 2022 celebrated what had been achieved. Activities included games and nature based activities. Comments from families who came along were overwhelmingly positive:

“Stuff like this for kids is brilliant. Great for mental health and resilience”.

“Good to have activities and get the kids out and about. Gets them into nature. ... And brings the community together... not been here much and only live up the road. Will have a look and explore. ... There is a tendency to stick in your own back garden but places like this bring people together and can acknowledge neighbours because seen them here”.



Step building

Impact

Note: Attribution of outcomes is difficult here due to the range of initiatives on the site, and unsurprisingly the local community does not distinguish between who has done what.

Positive attitudes and community pride: in general, at Winterhills there is a feeling of this with people commenting on the pond improvements, the tree planting, environmental activities etc. This is not all Natural Neighbours activity but more people have stopped to chat and say the park is looking better, they want to talk about the changes they have seen: *“I like seeing local people helping the park, I'm sure the changes will be lovely and I look forward to walking round and seeing them”* (resident walking past a volunteer morning, March 2022).

Increased community cohesion: different people are using the space in different ways at the same time, and engaging in activity to make it better.

Local people have gained new skills: volunteers turned up every other Tuesday to litter pick, rake over the site of the planned wildflower meadow and cut back shrubbery where the steps were to go in. One of these volunteers is keen to continue with more conservation work.

People taking ownership of their green spaces: residents here were keen to know what was happening and to be consulted and informed, which implies they feel some ownership of the space. They want a say, and to be informed, keen to ask and to know more. RMBC officers from different departments commented that: *“It has been quite busy with resident involvement”*, and *“We have always managed to link with the school and a sprinkling of residents but they [Natural Neighbours] have improved this”.*

Access to green spaces: steps have been installed at one entrance. A couple of local residents remarked that they really appreciated the steps going in *“we walk in here a few times a week and these steps will make our walking route much easier. We will come this way more often now these steps are here”.*

Biodiversity: the wildflower meadow will be an improvement, along with the bird boxes. In addition, Natural Neighbours helped with the Engine Pond's improvements to ensure a better habitat going forward and safer space around them.

Volunteers: Natural Neighbours estimates that just under a hundred people engaged in the planning and practical work at Winterhills: *"It's local people doing all this on a voluntary basis, spend a few hours to do something in their local area and get something back out of it"* (project worker).

Effective partnership working: this has been well illustrated at Winterhills. RMBC Green Spaces officers believe that Natural Neighbours has expanded the work already begun here, and shows the potential for future joint working between the council and SRWT. The Countryside Manager is now seeking to work with SRWT for bird surveying and habitat surveys and management suggestions to help support further work to improve the sites biodiversity. There are also proposals for possible hedge laying engagement sessions and new planting with volunteer input.

Appendix 1

Summary of evaluation methods 2019 - 2022

- Site visits. First visits in April 2019 included conversations and interviews with people using/living nearby each of the sites
- Design and facilitation of introductory evaluation workshop, analysis of participants' theories of change
- Interviews with volunteers carrying out environmental improvements at Winterhills and Boston Park
- Survey and conversations with activists re Boston Park
- Interviews and learning conversations with people using the four green spaces
- Interviews and learning conversations with RMBC Neighbourhoods Team and with individual officers
- Interviews and learning conversations with RMBC Green Spaces Team
- Interviews with staff from Eastwood primary schools
- Interviews and learning conversations with CLP
- Interviews and learning conversations with Casting Innovations
- Interviews and learning conversations with officers from various Rotherham based voluntary organisations
- Early Years feedback survey from families in receipt of children's lockdown packs
- Interviews with training course participants
- Participation in strategic partners meetings
- Participation / evaluation activity at walks and talks, engagement and consultation events in all four sites, included interviews, surveys, observation
- Regular meetings with and reflections sessions with Natural Neighbours team members, using reflections diaries

Production of 8 films – two for each site

Many thanks are owed to everyone who has contributed their time and thoughts.

Appendix 2

Overall evaluation framework: The aim of the Natural Neighbours project is to put greenspace back at the heart of the community.

Issues to address	What will make a difference	Indicators of success	Evidence	Outcomes – the results we want to see
Safety / perceptions that site are unsafe	Create a welcoming space	Local people take part in volunteering days	Numbers of people engaged in activities	Local pride will be improved
Poor state of environment	Bringing people together	Local people feel more positive about their community/neighbourhood	Create positive press stories	More positive attitudes /change in perception of green spaces
ASB/criminal activity/flytipping	Engage communities, listen to them and build relationships with schools, groups and agencies	Increased positive stories in media	Record examples of positive press coverage (through RMBC Communications Team); Analyse RMBC complaints	Increased community cohesion
Lack of community cohesion	Create positive images of the spaces	More people using the spaces	Interviews / door knocking Record visible evidence (photos/film) of change over time	
Lack of community ownership of the spaces				
Sites may be seen as a problem by agencies	Opportunities for people to learn skills to make effective use of the space	Local people learn new skills e.g. first aid, risk assessment, leadership, practical and team working skills Local people complete certificated training Local people use their new skills to take ownership of local sites/greenspaces	Numbers of people learning relevant skills Evaluation forms / feedback from training participants Observation of activities indicating 'ownership' (e.g. cleaning up, running activities etc	Local people will gain skills to take ownership of their local community greenspaces

	Families using outdoor space	Local people (children and adults) take part in outdoor / physical activity in each site	(Numbers of) People doing more physical activity than before they got involved in the project Participants say they feel good after site activities Interviews / door knocking Record visible evidence (photos/film) of change over time	People will have improved health and wellbeing
	Masterplans with long term aims and clear objectives People confident to use the space More opportunities and activities in greenspaces Listen to local people, involve community groups and support 'Friends of' groups to help sustainability beyond the NN project	Access routes, signage and information are improved Adults and children feel safer in local parks/greenspaces Increased use of greenspaces	Record visible evidence (photos/film) of change over time re use and care of site Record changed perceptions Interviews with greenspace users and local community Greater use and footfall	People see the spaces as an asset and develop new projects Access to local greenspace is improved People feel safe when using the greenspace More people enjoy a more biodiverse and healthier urban environment