

Increasing habitat area

Sheffield Estates meadowland

Introduction

Sheffield is one of a few large urban areas that specifically include urban habitats in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan. Many people in Sheffield live in high-density housing blocks surrounded by large areas of open space. The value of these spaces to wildlife and people had become reduced as they were inadequately cared for. The Manor and Castle Development Trust and Sheffield Wildlife Trust attempted to address social, economic and biodiversity issues in a collaborative project to turn around two of the most deprived areas of the UK: The Castle and Manor Estates. The success of these projects makes them an exemplar, cited as a case study in a range of publications including *Working with the grain of nature* (the England biodiversity strategy) and *Grey to green* (CABE's 'manifesto' for investment in Urban Green Infrastructure).

Funding

The project began with £2 million from the Single Regeneration Budget and from developers. In 2002 this had grown to £10 million, largely consisting of partnership funding.

Materials and Methods

Site

Around 20 000 people live on the Castle and Manor Estates. Before the project began the open spaces between blocks were viewed as 'badlands'.

Approach

The first step was to clean up the open spaces between housing blocks, removing burnt-out cars and other waste. Since then an increasing range of features have been added; including informal and naturalistic play areas, artworks, and the piloting of sustainable urban drainage and green waste processing. Biodiversity has been encouraged through a range of planting approaches such as wildflower-rich meadowland.

The meadows were planted with unique mixtures of wildflowers including exotic and native species, for example from the Pictorial Meadows seed range, with the aim of creating colourful, visually striking planting that appealed to both people and wildlife. The overall objective was to create meadows of impressive floral displays with a high resilience to trampling, low maintenance requirements and a long flowering season, and to provide a mix of species and structural diversity for local wildlife. They also

needed to be inexpensive, simple to manage and more sustainable than many traditional planting types.

Discussion

An incremental approach has meant that confidence and cultural change has developed at the same pace as the landscape. There were setbacks: shrub planting was vandalised and even sold off, so planting for a new area that was cost-effective to maintain and vandal-proof had to be devised. In the first year a mixture of annual seeding and herbaceous planting was used to ensure there was a good display and this was over-seeded with different mixes of perennials for a longer-term effect. These wildflower meadow-style areas reduced the theft and destruction of plants as well as being much appreciated by the public. Underground guying (securing by rope/cable) instead of staking is combined with immediate coppicing to help protect newly planted trees.

Much of the improved parkland is now managed by a social enterprise, Green Estate Ltd, the vehicle for funding applications, visioning, planning, delivery and maintenance. Nature conservation has become central to the social and environmental regeneration of the estates. The initiative has involved many local residents in the area's transformation. The key to success has been in giving local people a direct say in how the community gardens, tree nurseries and green spaces are managed. The lessons here have spread into policy and practice across Sheffield.

Reference

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2009). *Grey to green: how we shift funding and skills to green our cities*. CABI, London.