

## Environment and Human Health

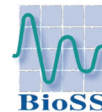
# Green space Services: Community Engagement Case Study

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This research is part of the Scottish Government's GreenHealth project. Participatory techniques have been used in a case study to identify community opinions on current uses of urban green and open spaces, and options for the future. Findings show the importance of the multiple services provided by green spaces, such as places for relaxation and escape, and desires to improve the quality and range of benefits.

## Main Findings

- Finlathen Park in Dundee is a green space which provides multiple services for communities of place (such as walks), and communities of interest (such as the sports facilities), whilst also contributing to wider green and blue networks.
- In this green space, the attraction of stretches of the Dighty Burn for peace and relaxation is a focus of local interest, with multiple benefits, such as for water quality, recreation and habitats, being derived from the community maintenance of the burn.
- The identification of sub-areas of the green space which support compatible functions could increase the overall effectiveness of such spaces in delivering multiple functions, and safeguard its value for relaxation and escape.
- The loss of small areas of other green spaces, in the vicinity of houses, may adversely impact on well-being by reducing the availability of places for short periods of escape.
- There is community interest in having greater responsibility for the management of areas of green spaces for local benefit.
- The facilitation and mechanisms of community engagement using newly available mapping and visualisation tools has been effective in stimulating interest, eliciting information and producing a 'bottom-up' green space plan.



## Background

The Vision of the **Scottish Land Use Strategy** is a Scotland where we fully recognise, understand and value the importance of our land resources, and where our plans and decisions about land use deliver improved and enduring benefits, enhancing the wellbeing of 'our nation'. It sets out guiding Principles and Proposals for sustainable land use to deliver multiple benefits. Its Principles include: Principle i) people should have opportunities to contribute to debates and decisions about land use and management decisions which affect their lives and their future.

Applying the Principles at a local level is envisaged to result in more consistent and integrated land use decisions. Objective 3 of the Land Use Strategy is for urban and rural communities to be better connected to the land, with more people enjoying and positively influencing land use.

This research describes the findings of engagement with local communities in a case study in Dundee. The study involved scenarios of potential green space content, use, and environments conducive to health and well-being identifying people's preferred choices for future design and uses of green spaces.

## Research Undertaken

We chose Finlathen Park in Dundee because of complementary work on the nature of engagement with urban green spaces, and the differences in meaning to different people (GreenHealth Information Note 4). It is located near an area of Dundee with medium to high levels of green space, and high levels of deprivation (GreenHealth Information Notes 2 and 3). The Dundee Open Space Strategy 2008–2011 was used to identify the overall requirements of local open spaces in the city, which involve delivering the desirable functions of formal and informal recreation, nature conservation, visual amenity, and support for frequent local use.

We used a digital map and aerial imagery of the park to represent the principal vegetation distribution and key natural and constructed features, such as the Dighty Burn, viaduct, and surrounding buildings and roads. We used the imagery in discussions with residents and park users to capture information on the different uses of the park; factors which might deter use; means of physical access; and views. This reflected findings of the urban green space and wellbeing study (GreenHealth Information

Note 4). We then used photographs and computer simulations of the park from different viewpoints to tailor the design of visualisations of features associated with the park (e.g. trees, burn, sports football pitch), and to test recognition of the site.

The data were used to develop a prototype 3D model of Finlathen Park. This was used with local stakeholders in a virtual reality environment to test its usability and inform the design of engagement activities. We used the model with community groups, with audiences of elected representatives, planners, community workers, residents, and some groups of children and young people, both familiar and unfamiliar with the area.

Audiences were invited to prioritise topics (e.g. woodland, access, facilities transport, lighting, etc.), and then select individual types of feature to locate in the park. Subsequent discussions of opinions within the group identified options for park management and layout or content which might increase use or other benefits (e.g. personal health, biodiversity, water quality in the burn and social space for different age groups).



Figure 1: Eliciting public opinions on current and alternative future uses of Finlathen Park, Dundee, in the Virtual Landscape Theatre.

The geographic distribution of features identified in the engagement sessions led to the mapping of alternative options and associations of key functions within the park. An example is shown in Figure 2. Some of the factors identified by audiences are highlighted, such as more trees along certain edges, or infilling of gaps, and potential functions of sub-areas of the green space.



Figure 2: Example spatial plan for park and adjacent area derived from engagement events.

Although the focus was on Finlathen Park, information was obtained on other green spaces in the locality, or local to participants. The content, quality, proximity to home or work, and issues associated with their use were documented, as were some metrics collected later, such as size, and the type of boundary (e.g. road, wall, building).

Commonly expressed opinions with respect to the uses of the green space for adults and children were:

- Peace and quiet outdoors, and fresh air.
- A meeting place with friends.
- Physical exercise by walking or cycling.
- Walking a dog.

Other uses of the park identified included:

- Observing wildlife
- Activity sports, mainly football and cycling but also fishing

Children specifically identified the park as a meeting place to play with friends (older children), benefiting from the mix of trees, bushes, open grass and the edge of the burn.

Commonly expressed opinions from participating groups were about refurbished, new or extended facilities:

- A desire to increase the woodland around the western and

northern edges of the park, thus dampening road noise

- Additional footbridges across the burn to enable more varied routes for walks through the green space
- Additional facilities: play areas; seating for adults; shelters for adults watching children's football or sport; permanent barbeque equipment for community use; dog exercise areas; car parking for weekend football games; improved footpath access to the park.

Disagreement centred on certain revisions to green space:

- Additional lighting for footpaths; some felt this would increase accessibility, especially at night and in winter. Others felt that this was intrusive and reduced the feeling of being in a natural environment.
- Different ideas about where features, such as benches, should be located.
- The risk of vandalism to features, although most age groups believed this would not be a serious problem, given the state of current facilities.

The Dighty Burn was a topic of interest due to: (i) local history, most significantly with respect to the improvements in water quality, and its links with adjacent areas; (ii) its role in the provision of a peaceful location for relaxing; (iii) the focus it provided for community groups (e.g. Dighty Connect).

Other factors raised by participants about access and use of green spaces included the potential for greater involvement in managing part of such spaces. Participants emphasised the role of small spaces for community-identified priorities, with reference made to other discussions in Dundee on the same theme. Concerns were expressed about the loss of small green spaces to housing, which had been used for exercising dogs at night, or for escape from the house where there was no private garden.

Feedback from participants included appreciation of being asked about local green spaces, and a desire to be asked again. Participants were enthused by being able to visualise, interact with and record opinions on options for future services provided by green spaces. Community officers valued the methods used; we have subsequently been asked to run such events for other green spaces.

## Conclusions

Finlathen Park provides multiple services for communities of place (generally adjacent to the north and south) and some communities of interest (e.g. relating to the burn and sports facility). Participants identified a number of multiple functions of the green space, in particular the role of additional trees in extending habitats and dampening noise from vehicles.

Investment in some well-designed facilities for encouraging increased use of the green space, such as seating and permanent barbeques could increase use of the space for family and community groups of all ages. Although the park provides multiple services and functions these are not always compatible. Some of those relate most closely to opportunities for, and types of, physical activity and well-being. There is recognition that sub-areas of the park could provide more mutually compatible services, such as areas for peace and escape, others for active sport and play, and a wider context of enhanced ecological and physical connectivity.

The uses identified for small areas of green space in close proximity to houses, for short time periods (e.g. 10 minutes) suggests their loss could be more significant than that of an equivalent area from a larger green space. This may be significant for policies which result in the disposal of green space in some urban areas.

Participants placed different emphases on the value of the engagement process on the one hand, and the research findings on the other. People with formal responsibility for community development and voluntary groups sought advice on mechanisms, access to materials, and opportunities for running equivalent events. Elected representatives stressed the importance of engagement using newly available tools, data, and approaches, reporting that this activity was a good model. Members of the public, across genders and age ranges, identified the green space as an asset, which had a positive contribution to health and personal and community well-being.

Individuals, representatives and community officers all expressed desire for communities to have greater responsibility for managing areas of green space for community benefit and in delivering locally identified priorities. This would be consistent with the development of community planning.

## Policy relevance

The activities and findings contribute to a number of areas of public policy. A focus on identifying people's uses and ideas for planning green space shows the application of several Principles of the **Land Use Strategy**: encouraging opportunities for multiple benefits from land use; encouraging opportunities for outdoor recreation, public access to land, provision of green space close to where people live; and opportunities for people to contribute to debates and decisions about land use and management decisions which affect their lives and their future.

The findings have potential implications for the planning and design of green spaces to increase the effectiveness of their use, and contribution to wider green infrastructure. These include community recognition of potential multiple benefits from green space such as relaxation and de-stressing, biodiversity, and as a focal feature to adjacent or local communities. This supports the aims of the **Scottish Planning Policy (SPP)** which recognises the community value of green space, the quality of the space, and the diversity of current uses. However, support for greater engagement of communities in planning requires the provision of appropriate advice and training in processes and tools. This needs to be targeted at the most relevant parts of the governance structures of community planning. This could aid the development of outcomes together with communities.

The research has also identified interests in exploring means of tenure which could permit community authority for management of areas of green space, beyond that of allotments. Findings also support arguments for the provision of 'extension type' services for informing urban communities, which is relevant to the current review of **land reform** in Scotland. The resource implications of such high-tech engagement tools need to be considered, and the outcomes of such exercises compared to those using lower-tech options before selecting the tools most appropriate to the task.

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