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Stevenage Narrative

The Green Heart Partnership (GHP) is a partnership between Arts Council England and the eleven local authorities of Hertfordshire. The GHP aims to achieve growth and capacity between the arts, environment and urban regeneration sectors. It looks to effect social change through partnership working and capital development. This report is based on research conducted during the summer of 2007 and does not take into account activities conducted since that time.

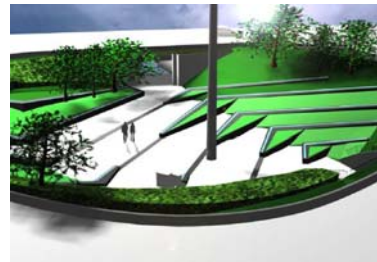


The Green Heart Partnership is involved with two projects in Stevenage in Hertfordshire. These are the Town Centre Gardens and the Pocket Park.

Pocket Park

GHP worked with the council to engage an artist to explore the potential of a usable, green and visually striking public space within the Pocket Park – a sunken roundabout. This is found at the junction of Gunnels Wood Road and Fairlands Way.

This cycle way and path junction below the traffic roundabout is a traditional part of Stevenage's infrastructure. The artist was tasked with reintegrating the area back into the community in a much more creative way. This is reflected in the project being a shop window for recycled materials and renewable energies in urban regeneration. The feasibility study for the redevelopment has now been completed and it outlines an attractive and creative development that, at this stage, looks set to meet its objectives. It will become a multiuse outdoor space as well as preserving its current role as a green thoroughfare. The East of England Development Agency has agreed to provide £240,000 of capital funding to the project with a target completion date of December 2007.



Town Centre Gardens

The Town Centre Gardens (TCG) are found to the East of the town centre and to the West of the Bedwell Residential Neighbourhood. The Town Centre Gardens are over 40 years old – part of the original New Town and are in need of redevelopment. GHP artists used a temporary artwork/building in the park as a focus for a series of



discussions and consultations that helped identify local needs and ambitions for the public space. The resulting interactive website is based on interviews with around 200 people – just under half of whom agreed to be filmed.

From the results of these consultations, the gardens will be remodelled and restyled preserving the youth centre, skate park, and creating community areas.

The resulting web-site has received a favourable response from the local council and local residents have been involved in the subsequent master planning process. Officers are clear that GHP involvement has been critical in producing a community consultation of better depth and quality than using traditional methods.

The first consultations took place in the summer of 2006. From this they then targeted specific community groups, in particular, young mums, skateboarders, young people, local residents and town centre users. The next stage involved selecting HTA architects as Master Planners for the projects who produced a draft version in December 2006. This formed the basis of a Heritage Lottery bid in March 2007. The Master Plan has been split into separate chunks so the initiative can seek multiple sources of funding. This is reflected in the Growth Area Funding which will soon start to allow for basic improvements throughout the park.

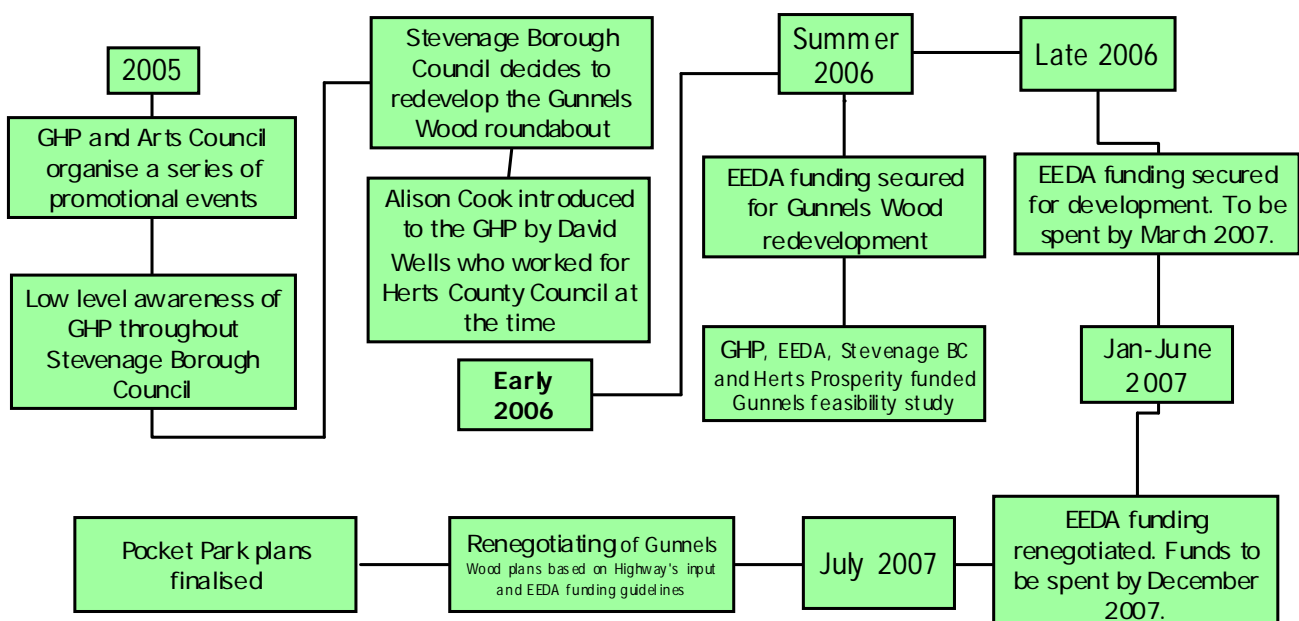
Exploring the Stevenage story

We interviewed project stakeholders, both in September 2006 and again in June 2007. The purpose was to prove how the GHP has influenced the community and the regeneration sector while uncovering the story of how both Stevenage projects developed.

Project timeline

Pocket Park timeline

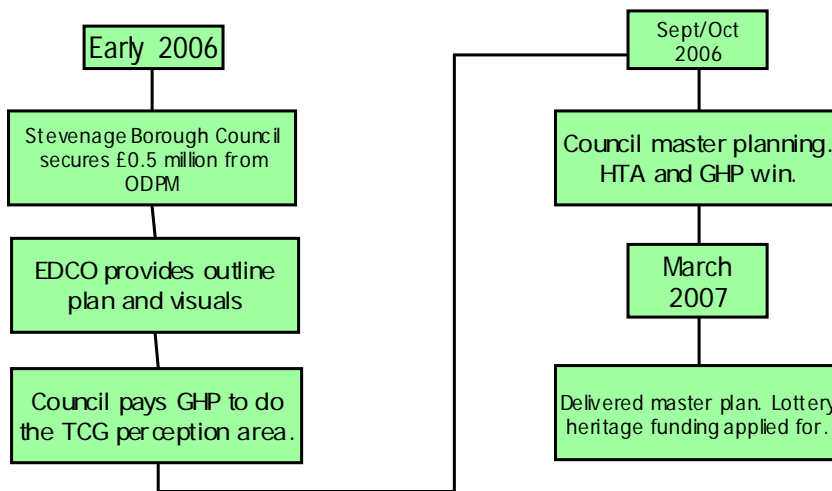
The diagram illustrates the evolution of the project – from Gunnels Wood to the Pocket park. It highlights that personalities were critical in developing the project and that the roundabout was scheduled for redevelopment even before GHP involvement.



The GHP was originally engaged on developing the Pocket Park Perception Area based on their success with the Pocket Park feasibility work. Upon completion of this work, Stevenage Borough Council held a competitive tendering process for the next stage of development for the Pocket Park. Three organisations were invited to submit tenders, to which GHP/HTA were successful.

Town Centre Gardens timeline

The Town Centre Gardens evolved in much the same way as the Pocket Park until early 2006. Once again the GHP only became involved once the council had decided that the gardens were going to be redeveloped.



Analysing the impacts

This section analyses the following impacts of the Green Heart Partnership; community consultation, partnership working and the role of the arts.

Community Consultation

Before

Before the GHP became involved, Stevenage operated a limited community consultation mechanism in line with most other English Councils. When the community was consulted, council officers and representatives used the following methods:

- Clipboard consultation on the street;
- Clipboard consultations over the phone;
- Door to door clipboard interviews; and
- Town meetings.

These methods did little to engage the wider community, with only small numbers of people answering clipboard questions. The people who turned up to town meetings (usually around 10 people) tended to be of retirement age and there was little (if any) representation from young people or other community groups. The result was that the community had little involvement in regeneration and no ownership of the issues that would affect them.

“Art in design – not on walls. That’s the strength of the Green Heart Partnership.”

Little community participation was also mirrored by the limited enthusiasm for community consultation from council officers. Most officials felt that consultation was simply an administrative hurdle to overcome in order to pursue regeneration strategy. There was also a universal assumption that consultation with the community would yield little information that would prove useful to the regeneration agenda.

During

During both the TCG and the Pocket Park developments, artists were brought in by the GHP to dynamically engage with the local community. The overriding idea was to engage the community in ways not considered before and to give them ownership of their local regeneration agenda. Methods used included;

- Filming of local residents and their activities;
- Placing cultural activity in the heart of both the TCG and the Pocket Park; and
- Local events run with residents.

The interviews and filming established a rapport between the artist and local residents. This encouraged local people



to take ownership of other activities. The most notable of which was residents 'looking after' the temporary works of art now in place in their community. This new method of consultation was well received in the community. Most residents – as well as local shopkeepers – appreciated being consulted and felt that their opinions had been noted and were deemed important. This appreciation formed the basis of further community involvement after the consultation period was completed.

Council officers were impressed by the GHP consultation. They noted that a level of community involvement had been achieved as never before. Officers also acknowledged that local residents had valuable opinions that could shape regeneration for the better.

After

The lasting legacy is that council officers are now much more aware of what can be done to engage the community. They appreciate that this process is beneficial to the entire regeneration agenda and are very likely to repeat a similar type of consultation in the future.

"The pocket park was the most interesting project that I've worked on in ten years."

Some local residents have a greater understanding of the regeneration process and knowledge of who the key players are. This makes it much more likely that local residents will become more involved in the future as long as opportunities exist. However, a key issue amongst residents is a perceived lack of follow-up from the consultation process. A number of people felt that it is now a 'closed book' affair or a 'one off' event.

There is a danger that if the community becomes disengaged with the consultation process they will no longer engage in regeneration in the future.

Partnership working

Before

Prior to GHP involvement in the Pocket Park and TCG, most regeneration projects involved key Council agencies and – on occasion – a number of private companies. Partnerships networked with key deliverer agencies and did not necessarily work with other bodies that may have been affected or could have contributed to the process. Partnership working was limited to departments communicating their intentions to others and then pursuing their own workload. Inter departmental or inter-agency partnership problem solving rarely – if ever – took place.

During

The GHP played a key role in ensuring that all relevant council departments (and associated private partners) were involved in the TCG and Pocket Park regeneration process. The GHP galvanised those involved by running meetings and making efforts to bring as many people together as possible. This was achieved primarily through the leadership, determination and management skills of the GHP. They

ensured that a multi-tiered partnership was established and delegated tasks and responsibilities accordingly.

Many of our consultees stated that the personalities of the GHP were the most important for making partnership working happen. This does bring to question whether the GHP approach can be replicated in other locations if the process is very dependent on the personalities.

After

Our stakeholder interviews reveal a much more positive attitude to partnership working. It seems that the GHP has made Council realise that future work should involve a spectrum of departments and not just the key players who are used to dominating the agenda. GHP involvement has galvanised this approach. Indeed, smaller departments are now aware that they have a crucial role to play in regeneration have been 'awoken' to this fact by the GHP. This makes it highly likely that there will be an increasing amount of partnership working in the future.

Role of the Arts

Before

Prior to the GHP programmes in Stevenage, Arts was almost exclusively undertaken for its own sake. ADOs were marginalised and were not consulted for regeneration issues. It was not considered important – or relevant – to utilise the arts as a means to reach out and develop communities.

During

The GHP used Arts as medium to consult with the community and as well as to rejuvenate the council-led regeneration process. This led to Council ADO's becoming involved in regeneration meetings and liaising with other council bodies for the first time for a major project.

The arts-led TCG and Pocket Park projects also allowed for the considering of new, environmentally friendly and unique design features for incorporation into the projects. This would not have occurred without the involvement of the GHP. Their design led approach allowed for the consideration of non-mainstream features that would not have taken place on a Council-led programme.



After

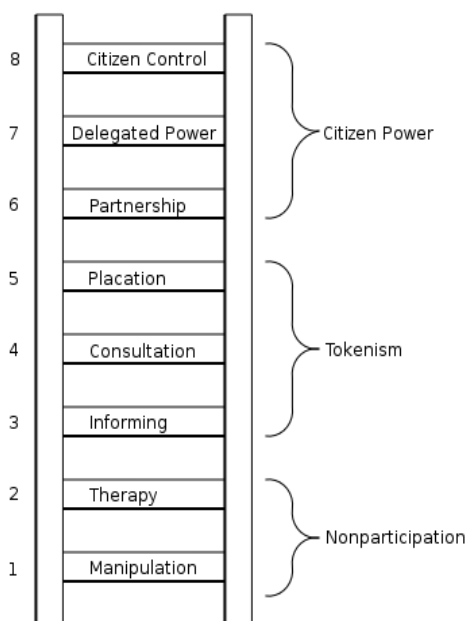
Art is now recognised as an innovative and exciting way to undertake community consultation exercises and build up partnership working. There is great enthusiasm amongst council officers to continue similar work in the future. This is especially the case as the GHP has led 'by example'. It is entirely feasible that future efforts will be led by ADOs, although their influence on partnership development is currently an unknown.

Interestingly, a number of interviewees have stated that art is not necessarily the only vehicle through which community consultation and partnership working can take place. Some have mentioned that music, drama or sport could equally be drivers in similar exercises. While these assertions may be true, current evidence is lacking. However, the fact that some council officers are thinking of alternative avenues for development is proof that GHP involvement has been successful in changing attitudes. Certainly, most would not have even considered such ideas without undertaking the Pocket Park and Town Centre Garden projects first.

Understanding the impacts

Community consultation

In order to fully understand the impact of the GHP in terms of community consultation it is necessary to put it into an analytical framework. The 'ladder' displayed below, illustrates the eight rungs of citizen participation on a regeneration project.



Citizen control – Final decision making is in the hands of the public.

Delegated power/partnership – to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision (including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution).

Placation/consultation – obtaining public feedback on analysis, alternatives or decisions.

Informing – Informing the public of analysis, alternatives or decisions made by the lead organisation.

Therapy/manipulation – providing the public with balanced, objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and solutions.

It would seem from our interviews that GHP involvement has moved community consultation from the 'informing' rung towards

'placation'. This has been achieved by the innovative consulting methods adopted by the GHP vis-à-vis traditional council methods.

The GHP has been successful in engaging the community much more than before. The element of 'delegated power/partnership' is still absent – with final decisions still be made by the council. However, this is still an improvement on before, particularly when considering the number of people consulted. Using the 'informing' approach only 15-20 members of the public were consulted. This was improved to around 200 community members during the 'placation' approach with GHP involvement.

This point is absolutely critical. There has been a clear move along the spectrum of community consultation and engaging 200 members of the community represents a huge step shift from previous activities. Although the move along the ladder has not reached the top rung, there are two points that are of note.

The time period would not allow for a full scale transition to citizen control

The Stevenage projects only began in 2005 (for the Pocket Park) and 2006 (for the Town Centre Gardens). It would take a considerably longer period of time – and many more projects - for citizens to feel suitably empowered to influence decision making on local regeneration projects. This is supported by evidence from the

2006/07 Best Value Performance Indicators survey which details the percentage of local people who feel that they can influence decisions in their locality. In Herts, the percentage was 26%.

GHP consultation ceased after the placemaking stage

The Green Heart Partnership was not contracted to carry out any further community engagement work after the placemaking stage. The responsibility for community feedback was then returned to Stevenage Borough Council and although the GHP did feedback to the community via a Public Area meeting, Stevenage Borough Council was then responsible for disseminating the remaining publications and any other consultation activities.

Although GHP involvement was critical in establishing a firm basis for community consultation, this basis risks being lost through a lack of a similar approach **after** GHP involvement had ceased. Given the rapid progress the GHP made in moving the community up the consultation ladder in such a short period of time it would be reasonable to assume that a positive change would be likely to continue. Stevenage Borough Council is now responsible for community council and has expressed a desire to continue utilising GHP methods. In this way, the lack of follow up that took place in summer 2007 and beyond was not the responsibility of the GHP. Whether this has changed since that time is out with the scope of this report.

Partnership working

There are three different types of partnership working that are relevant when analysing the impacts of the GHP. These are informing, co-ordinating and joint working. The movement from one type to another closely relates to the particular time of the GHP's involvement in Stevenage.

Informing – before GHP involvement

This first type of partnership working involves disparate individuals, departments and agencies working independently of each other (even on large multi-dimensional projects) but keeping each other informed of their actions. There is no joint problem solving outlet and work would always be carried out regardless of external activity or information. Communication is strictly limited to updates of work that may influence others.

Co-ordinating – at the start of GHP involvement

This second type of working involves disparate individuals, departments or agencies working independently of each other but synchronising their efforts with others. This would ensure that common interest information would be shared between parties, with work being closely co-ordinated in accordance with agreed deadlines and milestones. Problems, policies and issues would still however be solely handled by the department or agency concerned.

Joint working – characterised by GHP lead role

The last type of partnership working involves all parties working together in relation to the resolution of problems, issues and project concerns. Crucially, these concerns may not relate – or indeed be relevant to – all parties. However, all involved dedicate time and resources to the combined effort. Information is freely available from all parties and there is a common sense of purpose.

The GHP has helped Stevenage towards joint working capability

Informing was generally prevalent in Stevenage Borough Council before the GHP was engaged in regeneration activities. Most projects were run by a lead department with little involvement from any other department or agency. It would seem from our interviews that the co-ordinating stage began to take place as soon as the GHP became involved in Stevenage. It can be seen as a first step towards full joint working - all parties needed to understand their position in relation to others before coming together to work jointly. This took place around the time of the hand over of responsibility for the projects from other partners (EDCO for example) to the GHP in our timeline. This allowed the GHP to push different individuals, departments and agencies together using their remit as project leaders.

The completion of these events paved the way for joint working to commence as both the Pocket Park and Town Centre Garden projects began to mature.

Lessons for Stevenage and beyond

Maintaining results in Stevenage

The Green Heart Partnership has been successful in both raising the expectations of community consultations and in creating a platform for partnership working at the council level. A key question is the extent to which this can be continued in Stevenage, particularly autonomously.

Community involvement

Increasing the levels of community participation from around 20 to 200 people is one of the lasting legacies of both GHP Stevenage projects. Quite simply, without GHP involvement, this figure would not have been reached. The council has been extremely satisfied with the processes used to do this and has acknowledged that community consultation can be used to the benefit of projects, rather than for purely procedural purposes. It is entirely feasible therefore that this development can be replicated using council staff – particularly through the regeneration team, who have been given a considerably higher profile within the Council, thanks to the GHP. This also works from the ‘bottom-up’ as well.

“There was no follow up from the initial consultation and I don’t know the current status of the park”

However, a number of consultees felt that there was no follow-up after the initial series of consultations and expressed a hesitancy to be involved in future initiatives. This was not the responsibility of the GHP - rather it was the Stevenage Borough Council’s role after the conclusion of the placemaking stage. Nevertheless, it remains a salient point that it is important to ensure that if the community are to be consulted they are managed like any other council department involved in a project. They must be constantly kept in the communications loop and have their expectations explicitly controlled in order to avoid disappointment. If this is not done, the ‘box of community consultation’ once closed, may be difficult to reopen.

Partnership working

Virtually all the interviewees from council departments of council agencies stated that the GHP excelled in bringing disparate departments and colleagues together for the purpose of pushing a project through. Many mentioned the open-ended nature of communication but all stated that the personalities of the GHP were essential in ensuring partnership working was successful. This may mean that the long term future of partnership working may be in doubt if it is personality rather than process led.

However, the fact that many more departments are now aware of each other should ensure that they will be include in future projects – if only because they will pressure each other to ensure that that is the case. Because this process is not based on anything more concrete than awareness, the long term sustainability of partnership working may well be in question.

Extending the GHP ideals beyond Stevenage

There are no procedural difficulties in replicating the community consultation aspect of the GHP beyond Stevenage, provided that the Council concerned has an open mind. It would be helpful if the Council had ADOs who could have some involvement although this is not essential as even the Stevenage ADOs had a marginal role in projects before the GHP were brought in. The actual GHP process of consulting the community should be replicable elsewhere without any difficulties.

The same can also be applied to partnership working. The success of this in Stevenage was due to the personalities of the GHP. Using the same GHP staff elsewhere should have the same effect as the engagement is the same. However, it may be beneficial for the GHP to develop the process-end of partnership working. By developing a process – or blueprint – of how partnership working can work, the GHP can ensure that management and communications structures are in place above and beyond the personalities involved. This will ensure that partnership working after the GHP has left a project can be sustained.

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