

Greenspace Groups Forum no. 13

Meeting held 20/07/15 at the Storey Gardens, Lancaster

Present: Georgina Peacock and David Redmore (landscape designers), Ian Procter (Fairfield Association) Louise Belcher (Thwaite Brow Nature Reserve), Kathy Barton (Claver Hill), Roger Frankland (Civic Society), Ian Hartley (various voluntary projects), Joy Greenwood (Williamson Park), Fiona Sturgess, Janet Ward, Sue Widden and Alan Sandham (Friends of Storey Gardens), Simon Gershon (Lancaster Green Spaces)

Apologies: Rita Gerrard, Helen Ryan

The meeting was preceded by a tour of the Storey Gardens which is behind the Storey Institute. Originally two private gardens, there is still a dividing wall with doorways between the two. The garden immediately behind the institute has an old tennis court and mature beech tree in the centre. The second garden was laid out some 1998 as an orchard with branching paths and large bronze fruit on plinths. The bronze was stolen in 2008 and safety issues with walls, combined with a lack of finance and political will has meant that the gardens have since been closed to the public.

Fiona has been instrumental in keeping the gardens maintained and in the last couple of years, a growing active Friends group has enabled the gardens to open on occasional days; the City Council has also been making repairs and recently commissioned some designs.

The group has an excellent website - www.storeygardens.org and plans to open every Friday afternoon this August – do come along!

The theme of this session was ' Improving Public Access'

We looked at psychological and cultural reasons why people don't visit green spaces as much as they used to. There are also barriers to elderly and disabled people enjoying outdoor spaces. Some Muslim people may dislike sharing parks with a lot of dogs. We are a biased group though, we believe that spending time in nature is 'A Good Thing'. But other people may not share these values

We spent a large proportion of the meeting considering access by children, and there are some some worrying statistics: Natural England say that child visits to any green space has halved in a generation. Children often play indoors more than outdoors, and many never go on a trip into the countryside. We thought it pretty much essential that children feel at home in nature, understanding, appreciating and respecting it, as well as just using nature for their own ends. Why might this 'Nature Deficit Disorder' have come about? A combination of 'pull' and 'push' factors are probably responsible:

Push factors (pushing children away)

- Crossing roads is dangerous, as is cycling
- Secondary schools in particular make fewer trips, due to a greater syllabus pressures, lower budgets for extra-curricular activities, more paperwork, and a more risk-adverse culture in schools
- Fewer green spaces and playground areas (there is a policy of providing fewer, but better, playgrounds)
- More allergies, some of which are triggered by plants.
- A more risk-adverse culture, combined with the perception that being away from home and in semi-wild areas is perceived as dangerous

- Fatter kids, less able and willing to do physical activities
- Fewer scout/guide/cub/brownie leaders
- less nature knowledge amongst adults, including teachers and youth leaders

Pull factors (pulling children towards other things)

- TV. The average number of hours watched is scary!
- Internet and computer games
- Social media
- Parents not taking their children into the countryside as much (e.g. the most popular leisure activity in the UK is now 'shopping')

There are however some trends mitigating this, for example,

- Active green volunteer groups at universities
- Cycling and jogging are increasingly popular
- Many of us have watched a lot of nature programmes on TV
- More eco awareness and the Eco-schools programmes
- Growing interest in growing some of your own food
- A small number of 'Forest Schools' promoting outdoor fun and skills
- More Friends groups, some of which have active programmes with local schools. Check out www.fairfieldassociation.org/learningzone). It will be worth talking to the primary schools within walking distance of your green space.
- Summer programmes run by the City Council and Youth Clubs
- Greater provision (but still small) for disabled and special needs visitors

Within schools more can probably be done to bring nature into the teaching. Making bird boxes is popular, as is putting them up and surveying them.

For older teenagers, getting away from adults and spending time with their mates in a wilder setting has always been attractive. Regrettably, a 'leave no trace' ethic is often lacking, with smashed bottles left for us oldies to pick up.

Amongst adults, maybe spending time in nature is more of an affluent middle-class thing, reflecting class culture and values. Any sociologists reading this? Whatever the reasons, this is reflected in our volunteer profile – many of us are highly qualified, white and in our 60s and 70s.

We would like to see more provision for less able members of society to enjoy nature. That may be the provision of physical infrastructure such as ramps, steps, surfaced paths and seating. It may be better publicity for existing areas. There could be more provision for outdoor activities in care homes and sheltered housing, such as enabling and encouraging gardening by the residents, not just for the residents. There should also be better public transport provision to get from town to nice places – there are very few buses going from town to Williamson Park for example.

The next Greenspace groups forum will be on **Monday October 19th, 7-9pm at the Town Hall, Morecambe**. We will be having a further session with the planning team on land use allocations, as further consultations and research inform the development plan document.