



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

The Central Park Hub Entered by Plymouth City Council

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1. Project Background

The Central Park Hub project is part of a wider park investment programme led by Plymouth City Council (PCC), to deliver the aspiration in the Masterplan for Central Park, adopted by PCC in March 2013. In 2017, PCC committed £6m to upgrade the park, improving sports, play and recreational facilities, access, drainage and interpretation in keeping with the purpose of the park and sensitive to its natural and heritage features. This aimed to develop a 'premier park for the people of Plymouth and outstanding venue of regional and national significance for active recreation and formal sport, culture, art and the natural environment.'

With these aspirations in mind, the development of the Central Park Hub project focused on the central area of the park, closest to existing buildings and highest usage. Through a coherent design of a suite of new sport, play and community facilities, it aimed to provide a high quality, focal point for a range of ages, abilities and demographics, encouraging them to get involved in activities in the wider park, connecting to nature for health and wellbeing. At a total cost of £3.7m, the brief included design and delivery of:

- A new Park Café that blended into the park surroundings, drawing inspiration from the rolling hills, with a wildflower grass roof, to include public toilets and outside seating area overlooking a playground
- A new play area catering for all ages (the largest in the city)
- An all-weather events space with electricity and water provision
- An extension to the skate park to include areas for beginners, area and area for competition level use and parkour
- A refurbishment and extension to the Bowling Pavilion to create a Community and Sports Hhub with changing rooms for bowling, rugby and football to Football Association standards and meeting facilities
- Creation of 4 new hard surfaced tennis courts to Lawn Tennis Association Standards with floodlighting

The brief was clear that the design of the capital works had to reflect the setting within a natural environment, blending in with park surroundings to ensure minimal visual impact and enhancement of biodiversity, alongside use of robust materials to withstand high public use and be low cost for maintenance.

Works were phased between 2017-2020. The project was fully completed in March 2020, with the completion of the final phase and formal opening of the Community Sports Hub.

2. Outcomes for People and Communities

New sources of income have been generated from events at the events field, café and pay to play tennis, which have all been reinvested back into the ongoing revenue cost of park management to ensure high quality standards are maintained. The running of the new cafe has been taken on as a partnership between Plymouth City Council (PCC) and Fully CaterEd, a non-profit trading company owned by 67 local schools and PCC. Profits go to supporting healthy food in schools and activities in the park. The Community Sports Hub is run in partnership with PCC and charitable trust Argyle Community Trust, who run health and wellbeing, education, and employment activities in areas of deprivation across the city. Over the past year, despite Covid, they have been developing the use of the building as a base for community wellbeing and physical activity and connection to nature, making best use of its park location.

Through all of these improvements and provision of new park facilities, we have been able to open up the park for new users and have made a particular effort to target more diverse groups. This has included setting up tennis for people with visual impairment, provision of information to inform people about new opportunities available for play for children with disabilities, Park Run, AllStars children's cricket, a virtual reality park app which encourages families to explore, a summer programme of food and fun for children on free school meals and family 'give it a go' bowling. We also successfully applied for additional funding to pilot a green social prescribing programme from the Community Sports Hub in partnership with Devon Wildlife Trust, Theatre Royal and Argyle Community Trust which has supported new events for people with learning disabilities including hosting the Theatre Royals flagship community

festival; a dementia cafe; training events for young people; a walk and talk programme for those recently bereaved and a permaculture programme in the park run by our Green Minds project building our green volunteer base - this will complete in April 2022 and we are aiming to mainstream some of these activities. Having fully accessible paths, accessible toilets and changing facilities has enabled us to attract this broader range of people and open up new physical activity opportunities. As we progress into the football season this includes working with our Football, Rugby and Cricket Leagues and NGOs to encourage more women into the sports.

As a result of this work, we have also been able to lever in new DfT funding for an Active Travel hub at the park, which will provide access to a range of bikes, biking/walking activities and training courses and appropriate lighting in some areas of the park for safety. This will be implemented in 2022.

3. Planning Contribution

From concept through to implementation and evaluation, the project was led by Environmental Planning in Plymouth City Council's (PCC) SP&I Department. This enabled the project to meet the high planning standards and aspirations expected by the city; maximise use of developer contributions; evidence impact and make best use of existing strategic and local relationships to ensure delivery was carried out efficiently.

The project would not have taken place without the clear vision and aspirations set out by PCC within the Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan and the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan. The project Governance Board was made up of the SP&I Service Director and Portfolio Holders for Housing, Transport and Planning and Environment and Street Scene who saw it as an opportunity to evidence best practice implementation of policies including:

SPT12 - Strategic approach to the natural environment

HEA7 (PP) - Optimising the health and wellbeing benefits of the natural environment

GRO6 (PP) - Delivering Plymouth's natural network

DEV 27 – Green and Play Spaces

DEV26 - Protecting and enhancing biodiversity and geological conservation

DEV3 – Sport and Recreation

The Board were able to use various strategic initiatives to secure funding and resource for the project including:

- Corporate borrowing made possible from PCCs strategic commitment to invest in Central Park and Outdoor Play;
- S106 funding - working with other SP&I Planning Officers to maximise developer contributions from local developments for greenspace/play
- Using other SP&I departmental targets to gain external funding and work in partnership: this brought in revenue funding from the Football Foundation, in line with the Playing Pitch Plan; and enabled strong support and match funding in-kind from the Lawn Tennis Association.

Since completion the Environment Planning Team have led on the mobilisation and management of the new assets. This has resulted in new partnerships with social enterprises Argyle Community Trust and Fully CaterEd to develop the buildings and Lawn Tennis Association to build a new pay-to-play model all of which aim to support the social, environmental and financial sustainability of the park. This has resulted in additional funding for Green Social Prescribing; a programme of community volunteering and small and large scale events which bring in a new and more diverse audience, as well as supporting ongoing revenue costs (see section 1 above for more detail).

4. Outcomes for climate action

Landscaping for the project included over 2000 square metres of wildflower meadow, new pollinator friendly planting, trees and species rich hedgerow, as well as an area of green roof on the café. These elements are providing carbon capture, improving air quality, helping to manage surface water run-off and creating succession within the park's tree stock.

As a result of the hub project, PCC have altered management practices to reduce their carbon footprint. For example, by creating wildflower areas instead of amenity grassland PCC have reduced the amount of grass cutting needed within the park.

The new Events Field surface has alleviated drainage issues on the old field- severe waterlogging was leading to vehicle damage and a muddy site. The new surface allows for infiltration of rain water and vegetation to establish, while providing a defined area for vehicle movement. This has created space to employ no-mow practices to develop wildflower areas around the perimeter of the field, providing benefits in terms of carbon capture and surface water management, while further enabling PCC to bring in a no-mow approach and reduce their carbon footprint.

The operators of the Café and Community Sports Hub are also striving to reduce the use of single use plastics; the café for example offers compostable takeaway cups.

Paths were improved as part of the project and new cycle racks installed; the hub is on a key section of the Plymouth Cycle Network and these improvements have created better access for walking and cycling.

During the project extensive use of natural materials was employed; new benches and play area equipment used timber to replace old furniture and equipment that was primarily plastic in construction. The innovative design of the café sought to reduce the need for hard materials, through employing timber supports and a green roof, which has the benefits of capturing rainwater and carbon, filtering air pollution and reducing urban heat, while providing benefits for wildlife.

Where possible materials from site were reused within the project. For example, soil excavated for the play area works was reused to build up the area for the new tennis courts; this action reduced the need for waste disposal and vehicle movement during construction works.

Local contractors were used where possible and site compounds provided, helping to reduce the carbon footprint of the project.

5. Outcomes for sustainable development

The project meets the following UN SDGs:

- Good Health and Wellbeing: Supporting high quality public access to nature for physical, mental and social wellbeing.
- Industry innovation and infrastructure: Use of a green roof on the cafe to enhance biodiversity and reduce run off rates.
- Decent work and economic growth local jobs, local suppliers: Use of a procurement process which prioritized local suppliers/contractors and required delivery of social value. Partnering with local social enterprises to manage the new facilities, both of whom have education, training and health and wellbeing for children and young people at the core of their work.
- Responsible consumption and production: Reuse of materials on site where possible. Installation of water and electricity on events field to prevent use of generators/batteries.

Requirement of organisations to sign up to our Plastic Free Plymouth pledge. Creation of a low impact events programme on the events field.

- Clean water and sanitation: Provision of public toilets (including disabled and ambulant) and a free water bottle filling station.
- Sustainable Cities and Communities: Supporting sustainable use of high quality, public natural spaces. Creating spaces that meet diverse needs and abilities and provide welcoming access for new audiences. Creating new walking and cycling routes. Creating areas for community socialising and events. Supporting social enterprise.
- Climate Action: Delivering nature-based solutions for climate including green roof for biodiversity and reduction in water run-off, wildflower and native planting.
- Life on Land: Enhancing biodiversity through native planting and wildflower areas. Designing in opportunities for public interaction with nature. Ensuring design responds to and enhances existing natural park landscape.
- Partnerships: Working closely with the local community and social enterprises, with shared environmental, financial and social values - throughout the development of the project and post completion.

6. Community Engagement

The project engaged over 32000 people on social media and 518 completed questionnaires. Involving a range of user groups including the Friends of Central Park, skate users, families and sports groups in the design and development as well as feedback from non-users was critical to its success. Each part of the project targeted different groups, so as well as a park wide consultation we developed bespoke engagement for particular themes. For skate and play we focused on engaging children and young people. As the only public city venue of that size, the existing skate park was well used. However, on the periphery of the park, the young people were disengaged with wider park activities. We ran multiple outreach events, 'hanging out' at the site talking to existing local skaters and their parents/carers; attended sessions at a local indoor skate park and worked with a local youth group in the north of the city. This helped develop trust and get skater and BMX users groups' opinions and ideas to inform the new design. This led to an opening 'Skate Jam' event led by the city's youth skaters with music and prizes, attended by over 600 people. We also held a range of family and school engagement and consultation activities around the play area. Local Primary School, Montpelier designed a permanent poem in the play area inspired by nature activities we facilitated with them in the park. We held a large family festival during Love Parks Week with activities, music and a 'ride in the tractor' to get feedback and to develop relationships with the park grounds staff. To support ongoing stewardship of the natural environment enhancements, we developed a volunteer programme and local people helped with dry stone walling and tree planting and aftercare. For the Community Sports Hub, we set up a working group of key community and sports stakeholders who we met with regularly to help inform the design. As the improvements meant that the existing user group (Bowlers) would have to give up exclusive use of the building, this required ensuring they felt involved and building trust and relationships with new user groups. As a result of this work, this group now continues to meet to support the use and development of the building and identify new funding opportunities and activities. As a result, bowling has now opened up to support new family pay to play, supporting new membership. Targeting non-users was a key part of consultation and working with Public Health, we carried out over 100 in-depth interviews with a variety of health and community groups to better understand barriers to access. This helped inform both the design of capital improvements and ongoing park activity programmes. One successful outcome from this is a new social prescribing programme running from the Hub, with arts, physical fitness and nature based activities which has attracted a whole new audience to the park.

7. Leading Practice

At a time of extreme budget pressures for local authorities, alongside a commitment to tackling citywide health inequalities and a climate emergency, this project aimed to deliver environmental, financial and social value. This meant ensuring the development responded to and enhanced the natural park location in which it was set; created a springboard to engage a wider audience in using and stewarding this public natural space for health and wellbeing and brought in new forms of finance to support ongoing maintenance.

Some of the creative ways we delivered this were by:

Taking a Nature First Approach to the design and ongoing maintenance: This has included an undulating, grass roof on the Cafe, which reflects the topography of the site, improves biodiversity and creates an educational opportunity for park users. The single storey design also maintains views. Use of native and wildflower planting around the sites and building in bat and bird boxes into the building fabric. A play area with natural materials, supporting sensory engagement with nature, with the majority unfenced to encourage interaction with the wider park. A grasscrete events field which allows the space to hold HGVs but maintains the natural landscape aesthetics and includes water and electricity points to prevent use of generators. Training park staff in new wildlife friendly maintenance practice.

Building partnerships with community enterprises to manage the new buildings in ways that would offer social, environmental and financial value to the park and ringfencing the funds back into the ongoing maintenance of the wider park, moving away from the traditional 'lease' to a partnership approach where both parties have a vested interest in ensuring success and integration of the buildings with their park setting.

Going beyond consultation to support deeper and more meaningful engagement with the park, incorporating nature based activities for health and wellbeing within the engagement and targeting particular groups and demographics to ensure their involvement and buy-in - and then using these new relationships to develop activity programmes that support sustainable use and stewardship beyond the capital project.

The project was delivered on time.

Please note that this case study has been taken from their entry form and so RTPI does not take responsibility for accuracy of contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake further research into the project which is likely to have developed since the time that this entry was written.