

A park for the people: Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, Tunbridge Wells



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Summary

Grosvenor and Hilbert Park in Tunbridge Wells is one of 135 projects funded by the £254m Parks for People restoration programme, run by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund. This report shows the difference the restoration project has made, and explores the value of the park more generally to the local community. Building on research evidence on the social value of parks and green spaces, this report finds that Grosvenor and Hilbert Park is fulfilling its potential as a 'people's park' which is used and appreciated by a wide cross-section of the population. The community facilities and enthusiasm of the voluntary organisations supported through the Parks for People project, especially the Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert, show the importance of investing in people and social activity as well as improving the space itself. This investment paid dividends during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the park was described as a 'godsend' during the lockdown in spring 2020.

This report shows how the park has contributed to the six areas of social value identified through the Heritage Fund and Community Fund's *Space to Thrive* report:

- Involving the community.
- Improving health and wellbeing.
- Bringing people together.
- Engaging with nature and the environment.
- Reducing inequalities.
- Supporting the local economy.

The report identifies seven learning points for the future. These are:

- A successful 'people's park' requires a wide range of well-maintained, attractive spaces to cater for different groups, and a wide range of activities and events. Many of these will require expert organisation and facilitation.
- A strong Friends group is vital in linking park management with the community. But more specialist support is required to work effectively with more vulnerable users.
- A central building or hub makes community involvement much easier.
- An on-site park-keeper who knows the area and can build relationships with local people provides a valuable resource at relatively low cost.
- Connecting with nature is becoming increasingly important as people begin to understand the fragility of the natural world around them. Having expert staff and volunteers on hand can help to bring the natural world to life.
- Parks can be victims of their own success. If festivals and events become too big they can take over and become unmanageable.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic shows the importance of the park as a place for relaxation and wellbeing. But losing the community activities that had to stop during the lockdown would not be sustainable in the long term.

Introduction

Background

Parks for People was a programme by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund to revitalise historic parks and cemeteries. Since 2006 the programme has contributed £254 million to 135 projects across the UK. It is the successor programme to two other funding schemes, the Urban Parks Programme and the Public Parks Initiative. Since 1996, over £900m of National Lottery funding has been awarded to more than 900 UK public parks for capital works and public engagement activities.

This case study is part of a national evaluation of the Parks for People programme. The evaluation is being undertaken by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, along with colleagues at the University of Sheffield and Urban Pollinators Ltd. As part of the evaluation, the research team first conducted a review of the academic evidence on the social benefits of parks and urban green spaces. This document, *Space to Thrive*, was published by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund in January 2020. Following this research the evaluators examined six Parks for People projects, conducted at different times in different locations, to consider the impact of the funding and the lessons for local and national policy. These are:

- Alexandra Park, Manchester.
- Boultham Park, Lincoln.
- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, Tunbridge Wells.
- Myatt's Field, Brixton.
- Saughton Park, Edinburgh.
- Stafford Orchard, Quorn, Leicestershire.

This report starts by introducing Grosvenor and Hilbert Park and the work done there. It then looks at the impact of the Parks for People project, framing the discussion by referring to the six types of benefit identified in the *Space to Thrive* report. It then draws on additional research to consider how these benefits were affected by the restrictions on public parks and urban spaces imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Finally, it considers some opportunities and challenges for the future, learning points from the project, and the overall difference it has made.

About Grosvenor and Hilbert Park

Ask people in the know about the difference Grosvenor and Hilbert Park makes to its community, and one story keeps recurring. The story is a few months old now, but it's still fresh in people's minds: it concerns how Tony the park-keeper saved the life of someone who was attempting suicide.

'Somebody stabbed themselves on one of the benches and he rescued him, it was first thing in the morning, there was a whole community response to that as well, but he was the guy who actually talked him out of stabbing himself any more,'
(local housing worker, Grosvenor and Hilbert park)

Unprompted, the story is repeated by others: a member of the local Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert, a senior councillor, the council's parks manager.

Grosvenor and Hilbert Park lies in the northern part of Tunbridge Wells, a town with a reputation of being genteel and middle-class but which contains pockets of poverty and many people with hidden problems. The park used to be in the town's industrial area, close to the gasworks which has now been demolished to make way for blocks of flats. Residents say they're not stereotypical Tunbridge Wells people. They describe Grosvenor and Hilbert as a 'people's park'.

So what is a people's park? In this case, it's certainly not a lowest-common-denominator green space, the no-frills 'rec' typical of a lot of local authority provision in less affluent areas. Grosvenor and Hilbert is important for its heritage - the original park was designed in 1888-9 by the renowned landscape gardener Robert Marnock in the last year of his life - and is important ecologically, featuring examples of the chalybeate springs which gave rise to the town's original boom as a 17th century spa resort, wetlands, and unimproved meadows that are home to important flora and fauna.

The heritage and ecological importance, though, were overlooked for many years until Tunbridge Wells Borough Council successfully bid for money from The National Lottery Heritage Fund's Parks for People scheme to restore it.

Heritage and ecology aren't the first things people talk about when they describe Grosvenor and Hilbert as a people's park. 'It's got something to offer everyone,' one local resident says. It's hugely popular with dog walkers, as somewhere where dogs can be exercised off the lead, and for many years there's been a self-organised Lazy Dog Walkers' Club that meets informally near the football pitches. It's a popular cut-through for commuters travelling to London from the nearby High Brooms station, and on most days you'll find joggers, parents with buggies and small children, and youths honing their skills in the skatepark.

But this popularity hasn't generated itself. This report looks at why the park is now so popular, how the Parks for People programme has contributed, and the benefits the park generates for the local community.

The park and the local area

Grosvenor and Hilbert Park sits to the northeast of Tunbridge Wells town centre. While Tunbridge Wells has a reputation as affluent, the surrounding neighbourhoods, particularly in Sherwood ward, are more deprived and housing is generally smaller and more affordable.

The park itself is a combination of two areas: Grosvenor, the original park created on land gifted to the town council in 1888 and designed as a formal garden by Robert Marnock; and Hilbert Recreation Ground, a former farm on adjoining land donated in 1931 which contains pockets of ancient woodland (Folly Shaw and Roundabout Wood) with iron-rich chalybeate streams. The Hilbert portion includes two football fields and a historic oast house, now used as changing rooms for sports teams; the woodland areas are a designated local nature reserve.

The total park area covers 13.6 hectares and includes a wide range of facilities and habitats. At the southern entrance is a formal lake designed by Robert Marnock with 'dripping wells' forming an unusual feature. This section also includes tennis courts, a cafe and community hub, a bowling green and a children's play area. The Hilbert section is more informal, with woodlands and wetlands supporting a wide range of wildlife, a community orchard, allotments and sports facilities including a skatepark.

The park has always been somewhat hidden from view, surrounded by residential neighbourhoods and a railway line. Although there are 11 separate entrances to the park, none are visible from major roads.

Grosvenor and Hilbert Park has a long history of community activity and facilities. In the second world war it hosted a British Restaurant, which then became the Satellite youth club until its closure in 2003. A lido - part of a former waterworks - was a popular attraction for many years, and in the early twentieth century there was a bandstand. Grosvenor Bowls Club has used the park for more than 100 years.

About the restoration project

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was awarded £2.36m by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund in the second round of the Parks for People programme. Work started in 2014 and the project ended in March 2019. In addition to the Parks for People grant, the project received more than £300,000 from developers' contributions raised through recent housing schemes. The main elements of the project included:

- Complete restoration of the Marnock Lake at the southern end of the park to its original design and planting.
- Redesign of the Grosvenor Bowls Club changing rooms to create a modern, timber-clad building containing public toilets, a community hub and a cafe with interior and outside seating, open seven days a week.
- A new play area to replace the flood-prone children's playground.
- Improvements to park entrances, including a major restoration of the Rochdale Road entrance involving the relocation of an electricity substation and repair of the Victorian gates; repair and restoration of the gates at Hilbert Road; and improvements to the entrance across the railway line from Upper Grosvenor Road.
- Opening up the wetland areas by installing a timber boardwalk, benches and interpretation boards.
- Woodland improvements including path restoration and 'leaky dams' to slow the flow of stormwater.
- Planting a community orchard with seating areas, improving a previously underused grassed area.
- Restoration of the oast house as a heritage feature, removing modern paintwork and repairing original fabric.
- Employment of a community engagement officer to arrange events and activities and support the work of the Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert and volunteers. This helped to generate a total of 2,589 days of volunteer time over the course of the project.

What happened after the restoration

When the Parks for People project finished there was no special funding for Grosvenor and Hilbert Park. The park continues to be supported by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's parks service and its maintenance contractor, Sodexo, but the community engagement officer employed through Parks for People was not replaced. Most of this community activity is now organised by Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert (FoGH).

However, there are other organisations who work in the park or use it for activities involving the community. Most prominent is Kent High Weald Partnership (KHWP), which is funded by local authorities to organise volunteering and nature-based activities in green spaces and nature reserves. At Grosvenor and Hilbert KHWP have organised woodland improvements, run Forest School classes and coordinated a community allotment which has provided a supportive environment for people with mental health problems.

Town and Country Housing, which manages much of the social housing in the area, is also active in the park, funding the Mindwell art group and hiring the Hub for consultation events. Income from hiring the Hub and the rent from the cafe also support the park indirectly, as the money is pooled within the council's parks service and reduces the demand for further savings. While Tunbridge Wells has not suffered the same drastic reductions in parks funding as many other local authorities, it faces the same challenges of declining support from central government and increasing demands for services. This is likely to intensify the pressure to use parks to generate income.

Involving the community

It's common for communities to come together in response to a threat. In the case of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, there were two perceived threats. The first was real, a proposal by EDF Energy to build a road through the part of the park to service their substation. The second arose when the borough council called a public meeting to discuss 'developments' at the park; residents immediately feared this was a reference to building homes on part of the land. Together the two incidents galvanised the formation of FoGH, an enthused and active group of volunteers that now has 102 signed-up members and around 30 regular volunteers.

The formation of FoGH meant that from the start there was an active group of local people who could engage with and critique the restoration plans and help to set the agenda. When the council said there could be a community orchard as part of the restoration, one council officer says, 'they said hang on, it's not community if you do it, so they took over'. FoGH and local residents have been involved in design, in mapping and celebrating the park's ecology, in planning and planting the orchard, and in a wide range of events and festivals. FoGH estimates that its volunteers put in between 1,300 and 1,800 hours of unpaid time every year.

Grosvenor and Hilbert has become a focus for community events. Today the open space is used for an annual picnic for Love Parks Week which brings in around 200 people, and family fun days that can accommodate several thousand. There's a popular annual dog show, too, with more than 100 entries.

Not everything is successful. Comments by different members of FoGH show that putting on activities is a continual learning process:

'We did a barbecue that was an event for friends and we kept trying different days and it was never the right day.'

'The only thing that really didn't work but should have done was the morning coffees [for isolated people] ... perhaps if we did it for three years eventually it would have worked, but it's always hard to try and do something and the first three are a struggle.'

'Halloween is all young children. It's manic, loads and loads of children.'

'The apple day gets quite a few different people and people are really interested to see, cos you go through the whole process of making apple juice, it's something you don't see or understand until you do it, so it's something different.'

At the heart of much of the activity is the Hub, a stylish conversion of what used to be the bowls club's changing rooms into a multi-purpose meeting space with a cafe attached. The bowls club still uses it as their clubhouse, but it's available to hire and hosts a wide range of activities from a fish'n'chip quiz night to community carol singing and yoga. It's also the local polling station.

While the conversion wasn't universally welcomed at first - the bowls club, which has been at the park since 1912, had to operate from a shipping container for two seasons - it has proved central to the range of activities the park can accommodate. The cafe, which has replaced a small hatch in the old building providing takeaway coffee and snacks, is well used and has become a key meeting place in a neighbourhood that has few alternatives.

It would be a mistake to think this level of community involvement has come about by itself. As part of the restoration project, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council employed a

community engagement officer who facilitated events and activities from storytelling to Forest School classes. There are still some funded engagement activities: Kent High Weald Partnership runs volunteering sessions that attract ten to twenty participants every week for environmental work such as maintaining the wetland areas.

Maintaining engagement at the levels achieved in recent years is not easy, as a FoGH member explains:

'They set up such a good volunteering group that functioned once a week I think on a Monday, and a lot of people with mental issues and people who find it difficult to integrate, people who are long term unemployed came to that, and when these things stop, which stopped as the community engagement officer position finished, it all goes down the plughole.'

FoGH and KHWP have been making a case to the council for a volunteer coordinator to cover all the parks in Tunbridge Wells and support community participation, but so far without success.

From the local authority's perspective, the level of community engagement is an achievement to be proud of. As one senior councillor puts it:

'It's the whole coming together and, I think, just the joy and the way people use it and how busy it is, that says everything, if a place is busy you know you've got it right.'

Improving health and wellbeing

Every Thursday afternoon a small group collects at the Hub to create art. The Mindwell art group offers a drop-in session for people with mental health challenges that can attract between half a dozen and fifteen people each week. The artists share their work on Facebook, posting only the pictures without comments, so are able to appreciate each other's creations in a setting where people don't feel exposed to criticism.

The Hub, with its huge window overlooking the bowling green, is an ideal venue for participants to relax and create in, as the facilitator explains:

'When I first came here I had this idea that we would perhaps have this structure where we would meet, check in, go out into the park, find something, come back and talk about it ... but what I found is people that are using the group are developing, growing their own art practice, which I'm always greatly in support of. I think one of the fantastic things about the groups is I'm not teaching, I'm just here to try and support individuals to find their own voice in their art making.'

On the walls there's a selection of paintings by different group members. Having that space makes them feel welcome and accepted when their experience of community life can often be unwelcoming. One participant comments:

'I find I can leave my problems at home. I just paint stuff and do what I do really.'
The facilitator adds: 'The fact that you are physically doing something and not thinking is part of the solution ... if you're communicating something through making art you're able to distance yourself and we don't need to analyse or take things apart.'

The facilitator would like to start an environmental art therapy group and use the whole of the park as a resource for mental wellbeing, but that's an idea for the future. For other users, though, the whole park is already a resource for wellbeing. There's a community allotment where volunteering sessions have been organised as part of the Live Well Kent wellbeing programme, and people with learning difficulties have been involved in the environmental volunteering organised by KHWP.

Town and Country, which manages most of the social housing near the park, has worked closely with KHWP and a social prescribing project, Connect Well West Kent, that links individuals with therapeutic activities in their communities. Another project, Green Care, promotes green volunteering as a way to wellbeing.

'It used to be about digging the hole, but now it's about the person digging the hole,' a local housing worker says. 'A lot of the referrals are done through our housing managers ... They meet here and they've done the board walk, they've done coppicing, they've done clearing, they've done anti-flood stuff, clearing the reed bed.'

The mosaic of formal wellbeing projects, often funded on a short-term basis or for a dozen or so sessions in a season, highlights the wide range of needs within the community and the opportunities to mitigate the stresses of life through activities in green spaces. But the informal and self-organised routes to wellbeing are equally important.

The restored paths through the centre of the park, the ponds that have replaced the flood-prone playground and the boardwalk through the wetland all provide a setting where people can find their own space to de-stress. A member of the bowls club talks about going for a walk in the park to 'clear my head'. A commuter working for a London bank explains how he uses the park to leave his work worries behind:

'It's a really good break. My wife sometimes says "why do you spend 10 minutes sitting in the park?" and I might sit on the bench where the park goes across to Hilbert, or I might go down to the oast house and sit there for a couple of minutes, just collecting my thoughts. It's wonderful at Christmastime because you can see the backs of the houses and all this life that's going on ... it's lovely around about Guy Fawkes night or Diwali because you walk across the park, say it's a really clear night, and there'll be fireworks going on 360 degrees around you and yet you're in this little place that's your own.'

The use of the park for exercise almost goes without saying: there are joggers, skateboarders, cyclists and dog walkers whenever the weather allows. But people use the park for exercise because they see it as safe, welcoming and well-kept. As the council's parks manager explains, it's providing high-quality facilities and looking after them that attracts people:

'We have the volunteer activities, but ... the fact that the café is there and the play area is there and people are using it. We also have the bowls club there, people see people playing bowls, they may come and have a chat to them. It is the play area and the Hub and the bowling green, it's that area that's key to this park.'

'Without us being able to develop that, what was a brick box, none of this would happen, that building would sit there in the winter not being used. I remember when we initially started talking about this we had a meeting in November in the bowls pavilion as it was then and it was so cold in there, we tried to get heaters going, the electrics blew, it was absolutely freezing and it really brought it home to everybody how important it is cos this is not a useable space, we need to have something that's a useable space that is the focal point for the park.'

The health and wellbeing benefits of the project are echoed in responses to an online survey conducted alongside this case study. Of the 61 respondents, just over half (54%) said the park had a positive impact on their levels of physical activity, while 61% said their mental health had improved.

Bringing people together

One of the features that makes Grosvenor and Hilbert a 'people's park' is that it has something to offer everyone, and enough space for people not to crowd each other out - whether it's the football players on the sports pitches, families enjoying a picnic or dog walkers doing their daily round. That level of regular activity promotes the nodding acquaintances that help bring communities together.

This is increasingly important in an area that is becoming more multicultural, where the growth of private renting leads to a rise in the proportion of short-term residents, and where there are large numbers of retired and single people. Workers from Eastern Europe, refugees from conflict zones and newcomers who have moved out of London in search of more affordable accommodation all share the park. An annual lantern parade which passes through the park brings members of the community together; events like the Christmas carol-singing bring in people who might not otherwise meet. In the summer families arrive with food and picnics can continue through the afternoon.

The volunteering sessions run by FoGH and KHWP offer more opportunities for people to get together and make connections. The volunteers might not be people who are in touch with health or social services, but getting involved can make a big difference to their quality of life, as a former community engagement officer comments:

'Leaving the house generally, so going out, even if it's to the shops, coming to an event, specifically here, you get people who start to engage more with the regular events or volunteering. Just being more communicative I suppose and joining in a bit more in their local community. You can see physically, just in people's behaviour, a change from being quite enclosed and quiet to a bit more open and relaxed.'

Many of those who take part in environmental work or join FoGH might not admit to being lonely or isolated, but as one council officer points out, for some volunteers:

'it's a lifeline, coming out and talking to people....Even if they come and just talk all day and make tea rather than actually doing anything, for us it's fine because people are doing stuff anyway, but for them it is a lifeline I think, having that engagement and that social interaction with people that they possibly wouldn't be getting otherwise.'

However, activities specifically targeted at people who are isolated - such as a coffee morning for elderly people - have been less successful. The level of commitment required by both the organisers and participants, it seems, is too much to make such activities sustainable without additional support.

Engaging with young people has also proved challenging. For primary-age children and those in their early teens activities like Forest School can be fun and interesting, and provide an alternative to school or home environments where there is little open space. Teenagers and young adults tend to be less willing to join in organised activities, although an official graffiti wall has proved popular, with new artworks appearing regularly. The skate park is well used, but is physically and socially separate from the hub area, creating the impression that young people have their own domain within the park.

Engaging with nature and the environment

On an April day at dusk you might find a group of 20 or 30 people, a mix of adults and children, looking intently around the trees and ponds. Leading them will be Dr Ian Beavis, research curator at the town's Amelia Scott museum and renowned local entomologist. The party will be looking for bats that have recently emerged from hibernation, and participants will be conspicuous by their torches and bat detectors.

For the people who take part, the park becomes a different place - no longer just somewhere to visit the cafe or playground or walk the dog, but a new world waiting to be discovered. Ian Beavis's enthusiasm is infectious. FoGH continually ask him to host bat walks or moth identification days. Within the council he's seen as something of a local institution. As one councillor comments, 'everybody loves him cos he's so passionate about the wetlands, about the bats, the butterflies, he's part of the museum team and he's wonderful with the children'.

Having a knowledgeable enthusiast on hand makes a big difference in bringing the park to life for local people. Dr Beavis isn't the only one: the staff at KHWP do the same through their environmental work, and members of FoGH share their own knowledge through talks and events.

Without these, much of the park would remain hidden in plain sight. If you enter Grosvenor and Hilbert Park from the town centre end, to the south, the first impression is of a formal park: the restored Marnock lake, tennis courts, and the Hub and play area, opening out into grassy areas with cycle paths.

From the north or the northeastern entrances the park looks very different: woodlands, wetland and a more rural look and feel. This diversity not only makes the park interesting for visitors, with plenty to explore and discover, but is important ecologically. The Hilbert side of the park, gifted to the town in the 1930s, was never developed other than to accommodate sports pitches and allotments, and more recently the skate park. As a result the chalybeate springs that bring mineral-rich water into the town have remained undisturbed, along with pockets of ancient woodland and 'unimproved' grassland that is home for a wide range of rare species. Since the restoration interpretation boards have been installed with information on the local wildlife, and explaining some of the new features including 'leaky dams' installed by volunteers to slow the flow of stormwater from the streams. Among the people responding to our online survey, 72% said the park had a positive impact on their connections with nature.

'There are a lot of unusual plants and animals in the park which are very important in the local ecology,' a local natural history expert says. 'The council I think is very good at looking after natural heritage as well as built, particularly the parks team have obviously been very keen on preserving natural habitat, they don't use pesticides or tidy up fallen timber unnecessarily.'

'I think it's a very important oasis for wildlife within the urban area, certainly in terms of ancient woodland, that is quite a significant piece of ancient woodland and there are things there, wood horsetail is the one that everyone quotes but it's really rare, there's only two or three other sites in Kent.'

In the past such knowledge might have been the preserve of a few experts and generally been overlooked by park users. That is starting to change.

'People become aware, they're more aware that the environment generally is under threat which makes people keen to preserve what is left, particularly when it's right there on their doorstep' the natural historian observes. 'There are certain

things that capture people's imagination, we mentioned bats but bees is another one because, again there are all these messages that have got through to a surprising number of people.'

The council's park manager says nature-based activities in the park have become enormously popular, from pond-dipping to birdwatching and butterfly and moth observation. As a result the parks service is converting four flower beds by the bowling green into a 'night garden' designed to attract moths.

'The number of volunteers that we attract and ... the number of people that will attend a talk about anything from bats, bees to anything else, it's incredibly popular,' the parks manager observes. 'That says to me that the environment is really important to the local community.'

Connecting with nature is at the heart of Forest School activities run by KHWP, using the park as an outdoor education centre. 'You often find that children who aren't doing very well in a classroom environment, behavioural or academically, flourish once they're outside in the woods,' the Forest School coordinator comments.

At a wider level there is an understanding that parks are becoming important to local responses to climate change. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has declared a climate emergency, and as a result is looking to reduce carbon emissions as it renews its parks maintenance contract this year.

Reducing inequalities

While Tunbridge Wells is a wealthy town, the area around Grosvenor and Hilbert Park is more mixed. On one side of the railway line that borders the park to the west are substantial Victorian villas, many now divided into flats; on the eastern side there are streets of Victorian terraces. To the south, on a former gasworks site, are new flats, many of them used for social housing, while to the northeast is Sherwood, a former council estate built in the 1950s.

A local housing worker describes the area as a hidden pocket of disadvantage in an affluent town. The park provides an ideal site for engaging with the local community. A partnership between Town and Country Housing and KHWP has attracted volunteers to help look after the open spaces in housing estates as well as the park itself.

Because there are 11 separate entrances to the park, it serves all the surrounding communities. The social housing includes sheltered accommodation and homes for single people, many of them without gardens - so the park is the only outside space residents have. Many residents have long-term illnesses or mental health problems.

While the St James council ward, which includes the park itself, is one of the 20% least deprived wards in England, the neighbouring Sherwood ward is in the most deprived 20%. Parts of Sherwood fall within the worst 10% for education, training and skills. There are also pockets of hidden disadvantage: parts of St James' ward fall into the worst 20% on measures of pensioner poverty. Childhood obesity is a particular problem in Sherwood.

While it's hard to tell whether the park restoration is making any difference to entrenched challenges of deprivation and disadvantage, the interest in volunteering and wellbeing activities suggests that the work of local housing and healthcare organisations is valued. Town and Country Housing has also used the Hub for community consultation events and to engage with local young people.

Supporting the local economy

Parks can be good for business. Where parks are popular and well maintained, estate agents routinely use them as selling points for local properties. That is beginning to happen in the area around Grosvenor and Hilbert Park.

There are also some obvious business impacts such as the popularity of the cafe at the Hub, and the use of the park for bootcamps or dog walking enterprises. Festivals provide an opportunity for catering firms to run food stalls. Some graffiti artists who started out using the graffiti wall created as part of the restoration project have now set up their own business, Paint Mechanics, doing street art.

The economic impact of these activities on the local area is unlikely to be substantial, as these businesses are small scale and the park is likely to be one of several sources of income. But they do show a rising level of confidence in the locality and the signals this sends to the local market may be more important than the actual income generated.

There were also some economic impacts from the restoration itself. Two apprentices and three graduate rangers were recruited as part of the restoration project, although only one apprentice completed their training.

A more important factor, though, may be the impact on the 'foundational economy', the generally low-paid and often unpaid work of caring and coping that enables other economic activity to take place. A healthy foundational economy reduces pressure on public services and healthcare; keeping it healthy provides opportunities for support workers such as therapists and carers. Organisations like KHWP are part of this economy, and the work of supporting volunteers and activities in the park builds healthy and more economically active communities.

For those who receive support, the difference is crucial, as one support worker explains:

'It's a huge part of their life to get engaged. We have a chap who comes every Thursday who has learning difficulties, for him that's his life, it's like someone going to work, for him it's a huge part of his life to come to do this and he gains skills and confidence and socialises and without that you wonder what they would be doing.'

Getting people into work is a significant outcome, but it isn't the only one that matters. A housing worker points out that while local residents may be defined as economically inactive, they are actually very busy with caring and coping. The skills to do that well may be more immediately important in an individual's life than the income from a job. Occasionally there are obvious wins, as with youth work that took place in the Hub:

'The first session would be completely wild cos the kids were popping lots of alcohol and pills but by week six they'd been corralled, you could actually have a conversation with them. So that programme, there was a 12 week partnership programme ... out of that two of the lads that were dancing on the roof here are now working for Town and Country's grounds maintenance contractors as apprentices, started a course at Hadlow college, just about to do their driving lessons.'

Grosvenor and Hilbert Park during Covid-19

Introduction

During the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020, we interviewed 12 park users to find out more about what they valued about Grosvenor and Hilbert Park and how restrictions on movement and activities were affecting them. Their experiences are summarised below.

Interviewees (All names have been changed to protect anonymity):

- Colleen 52, lives with her husband and two children aged 10 and 13 around 700 yards from park.
- Edward, 64, is retired and lives locally with his wife. He's an active member of the local bowls club.
- Charlotte and Sebastian, late 50s, live in a house that backs onto the park. Charlotte is a wheelchair user.
- Winston, 59, lives locally with his wife and during lockdown has been joined by their two adult daughters.
- Karlena, 70, is retired and lives with her partner on the edge of the park where she has an allotment.
- Nadine, 54, lives near the park with her husband and their 19 year old daughter, and has two other adult children.
- Maxine, 44, lives locally with her husband and two children aged 10 and 8.
- Daisy, 36, lives nearby with her husband and two children aged 18 months and nearly 4.
- Harmony, 76, is retired and lives with her husband Harry, 83, near the park. They are often visited by grandchildren of various ages.
- Linton, 52, lives about a minute's walk from the park with his wife and teenage daughter, and has an allotment at the park.

Before the lockdown

Interviewees used Grosvenor and Hilbert Park for a wide range of activities: Reflecting its range of facilities and landscapes. For Colleen and Sebastian it was a place to take part in practical volunteering sessions with Kent High Weald Partnership; Karlena, Charlotte, Maxine and Nadine also join in events organised by Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert (FoGH) including crafting and the autumn Apple Day. Edward is a member of the bowls club. Karlena and Linton both have allotments on the Hilbert site next to the park.

For Colleen and Sebastian volunteering provided a way of making a contribution or 'giving something back' to the community. It was also a way of keeping fit:

'I do it for social reasons as well but there's also the fact that it's quite a good workout and I don't have to go to the gym or anything...' (Sebastian).

Those with children and grandchildren use the play area - Maxine says she would usually visit around three times a month, while Daisy would go around four times a year. Harmony and Harry and Edward all mentioned the playground as a place to go with grandchildren. But informal or woodland play is also important. Linton has

explored the woods with his daughter, and Colleen's children have taken part in forest school activities.

The park is also popular for walking, especially for the older interviewees. Winston has a dog and walking in the park is part of his regular routine. The park also serves as a green shortcut to High Brooms station for those commuting to London.

'I get the train to London and [my daughter] would get the train to school and we walk through the park every morning and it just gives us a lot of joy' (Colleen).

Wildlife is an important aspect of the park for Charlotte and Karlena. Karlena is particularly fascinated by the park's ecology and both she and Charlotte have been involved in the community orchard. Karlena emphasised the value of 'sitting and watching' the natural world, and Maxine talked about 'communing with nature' as the most enjoyable aspect of the park:

'You can go in the woods and you can hear the birds sing and it's, you know, it feels like you're actually stepping out of [town] you know, you kind of really feel like you're communing with nature as it were.'

During the lockdown

Most interviewees were using Grosvenor and Hilbert Park more: Nearly all interviewees were using the park more than previously, mainly for walking or as somewhere to play with children. Linton, Maxine and Daisy said they had visited the park nearly every day during the lockdown. Daisy, who had only used the park very occasionally before, discovered it as a place to play with her young children despite the playground being closed. Most interviewees had used the parks for walks, sometimes as a family group, and Karlena commented on how this seemed to hark back to a bygone age when families had time to be together:

'Now you get whole groups and they're learning to cycle, they're learning about plants, they're learning to wait for other people, all sorts, it's lovely. I think it's been, in that respect ... it's almost like winding the clock back at my age where families seem to operate more as proper groups.'

Others, including Winston and Linton, used the park as part of a pattern of wider explorations of local green spaces. Linton would incorporate the park into his running routes, while Winston discovered woodlands nearby that he had not previously visited.

As the lockdown eased people began using the park for a wider variety of activities including picnics and meeting friends; Colleen's daughter was able to take part in outdoor taekwondo classes. In May and June the park began to be used for barbecues and larger social gatherings, prompting some concern from interviewees about littering and antisocial behaviour.

But there were activities people could no longer do: The suspension of volunteering activities, clubs and events affected several interviewees. The closure of the play area also affected parents of younger children. But for the most part they found alternatives or accepted the wider public health reasons for the suspension of their normal routines and connections. For Charlotte, who is a wheelchair user, the park became the only place to go outside as she was concerned about the risks of Covid-19. Nadine was disappointed that events organised by FoGH were not happening and was more cautious than other interviewees, avoiding busy times in the park and spending more time in her own garden. For most interviewees trips further afield stopped, although some continued to visit other green spaces within walking distance in Tunbridge Wells.

The park became an important social space even when people couldn't gather together: In the early stages of the lockdown people were not permitted to socialise with those outside their own household. Chance interactions in the park became an important way of keeping a degree of social contact and interviewees generally found their interactions with other park users positive and friendly.

Harmony spoke of a 'wartime spirit' of people supporting each other, and Nadine, who at one point put posters up in the park to help with the search for a missing person, had spoken to passers-by who were concerned and supportive. Maxine said it had been 'really lovely to connect with people' in the park. Karlena, who was able to chat with passers-by from her allotment which borders the park, commented:

'Initially there were far fewer people out and about anyway, you know you do run into people and have a bit of a catch up. But I think we've been quite diligent about keeping our distance in a funny way I think it's sort of brought people together even though they've been distanced.'

Harmony and Harry said this was part of a wider attitude of neighbourliness, commenting that this was the first time in 39 years that they had known the names of all the people in their street.

Most interviewees said the park was important for their wellbeing during the lockdown: Linton and Maxine both described Grosvenor and Hilbert Park as a 'godsend'. Linton's allotment was a place to be outdoors and get exercise while remaining socially distanced, and for Maxine, who was homeschooling her children, it was a place to relax at the end of the school day:

'We go out for a walk every afternoon after [we've] sort of done our school stuff and we went every day to that park. It was like a godsend ... I was just so grateful that we had it. I was so, so grateful.'

Similarly, Daisy, who has very young children, discovered the park as a place for a day out on her doorstep when previously she would have taken the car out to visit a National Trust property:

'It's just been a really happy place to go for us actually and it's a much slower pace of life [...] before, for me, it was somewhere that I'd walk through quite quickly and not really notice anything whereas now, you know, we're looking at the trees and what kinds of trees they are... it's kind of almost been a new discovery for us. It's made us realise that there's a lot more that we can do in the park, that we don't necessarily have to pay for a nice time out with the kids, we can just go and enjoy time there.'

For some interviewees this increased wellbeing was connected to a greater awareness of nature. Charlotte spoke about the importance of wildlife in the park, while Winston appreciated the opportunity to enjoy nearby woodlands. Linton described the mental health benefits of noticing nature:

'I went for a walk last night which wasn't entirely through the park. but it took me into the park, you know, and I felt just invigorated when I got back from that. And a lot of that was walking through the park and, you know, spending time looking at the trees, just absorbing things that I probably wouldn't normally notice.'

Maxine contrasted this connection with nature with the stresses of lockdown:

'You know, it was such a, you know, unnerving and stressful time. Just to be able to actually have somewhere to go and ... there were ducklings and baby moorhens on the pond ... it just was so nice. Again, that whole nature thing, to

get out and to actually be able to breathe and just de-stress really by having somewhere that's nice to walk around.'

The main negative effects experienced were connected to being unable to see relatives or grandchildren. For Edward not seeing his grandchildren was 'horrible' and the worst aspect of the lockdown. Nadine, by contrast, was concerned about littering and antisocial behaviour, and missed her involvement with FoGH events.

Challenges and opportunities

Most parks present several perennial challenges. These include effective day to day care and maintenance, integrating volunteers with professional staff; sustaining active community involvement; managing competing interests between different users of the park; and protecting and increasing biodiversity. Many, including Grosvenor and Hilbert, sometimes suffer from crime and antisocial behaviour. This is usually at a low level but once a park gains a reputation for littering, vandalism and crime it is hard to shake off, so it requires careful management. At Grosvenor and Hilbert there have been concerns about county lines drug dealing, often at the entrances to the park, as well as the more typical problems of dog fouling.

While these are important, they are not the main issues for Grosvenor and Hilbert. Four issues in particular present both a challenge and an opportunity.

Sustaining volunteering is particularly important because of the central role of FoGH as a key partner in the restoration project and the main organiser of community activities. At an earlier Heritage Fund project in Tunbridge Wells, Dunorlan Park, a strong Friends group was in place when the project was completed. Ten years later, many of these volunteers are elderly and as a local councillor points out, 'at 85 you can't be out all the time'. It can be relatively easy to enthuse residents about a restoration project and new ideas with funding to back them up. Keeping things going without new pots of money is more testing and less rewarding. At present, while FoGH is healthy and well supported, there is an opportunity to plan for the future and bring new people and ideas on board. While more than half the survey respondents took part in some sort of volunteering, only four said they volunteered more than once a month.

Sustaining community engagement is a challenge and opportunity for similar reasons. The particular challenge is to engage more vulnerable or disengaged members of the population, including isolated older people, people with mental health problems and young people. All need to feel the park is their space and they are welcome there, but in each case a level of active facilitation is needed which is likely to be beyond the capacity of a Friends' group. KHWP has been particularly effective in this respect, but charities' reliance on short-term funding programmes means continuity is always at risk. The community engagement officer employed during the course of the restoration has moved on and not been replaced, and their work has not been picked up by the local authority. There are particular opportunities to build on the success of nature-based events and therapeutic activities such as the Mindwell art sessions, but growing such activities requires time, patience and people skills.

Contract management is a particular issue in Tunbridge Wells. Parks services have been outsourced to a large contracting company, Sodexo, which has achieved economies of scale but at the expense, some argue, of skilled staff and local knowledge. There is particular praise for the park-keeper, Tony, who has become a well-known and respected local figure, but Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and FoGH cannot force Sodexo to keep Tony in his current role. The parks contract is up for renewal this year, and while cost will continue to be a key issue in procurement because of the financial constraints faced by the council, there is an opportunity to rework the contract to specify a greater level of involvement by parks staff in the activities that take place in the park. Residents and FoGH members have also expressed concerns about Sodexo's failure at times to do maintenance work specified in the contract. A comment by a senior council officer is revealing: 'Talking to Sodexo management, there's a balance between engaging [with people] and cracking on with the work. We don't measure performance on community engagement. It's not part of our KPIs [key performance indicators] but it registers with the community.' Including

community engagement in measures of Sodexo's performance could make a big difference to the way the contractor approaches the work of park management.

Biodiversity and climate change will be continuing challenges for all parks, but also present an opportunity to put parks on the map in a new way. Already the park is being used to demonstrate approaches to floodwater management that might become increasingly necessary during periods of intense or prolonged wet weather. The ecological importance of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park is increasingly well known. As awareness of the importance of nature grows at a local scale, approaches to conservation at Grosvenor and Hilbert could become a template for work elsewhere in the borough, inspiring new activities and community involvement in other parks and green spaces.

Learning points

1. One of the key achievements of the restoration of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park has been to create a 'people's park' with something for everyone. But this is not easily achieved or maintained. It requires a wide range of well-maintained, attractive spaces to cater for different groups within the local population (children, dog walkers, sports enthusiasts, people with disabilities and many more). It also requires a wide range of activities and events. Many of these will require expert organisation and facilitation.
2. A strong Friends group is vital in linking park management with the community. But the Friends and volunteers cannot do everything. Working with people with disabilities or mental health problems or young people requires time, professional knowledge and a level of expertise that is not generally available within friends' groups.
3. A central building or hub makes community involvement much easier. In a large park a cafe and meeting space open up access to different groups and provide seating and shelter for those who cannot walk far or for extended periods of time. It provides a space where people can start getting involved in activities and can help to plan the park's future. It can also generate income: the Grosvenor and Hilbert Park Hub hosts around 300 events a year.
4. An on-site park-keeper who knows the area and can build relationships with local people provides a valuable resource at relatively low cost. Such a person becomes a trusted intermediary, providing informal help and advice above and beyond their professional maintenance role.
5. Connecting with nature is becoming increasingly important as people begin to understand the fragility of the natural world around them and the risks of climate change. Having expert staff and volunteers on hand can help to bring the natural world to life.
6. Parks can be victims of their own success. If festivals and events become too big they can take over and become unmanageable, placing a burden on volunteers and potentially damaging the park itself.
7. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic shows the importance of the park as a place for relaxation and wellbeing in stressful times, and its versatility as a place for play and social connections even when facilities such as the play area and cafe are closed. But it is also notable that some of the most important aspects of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park's success could not continue during the lockdown. The Hub and cafe were closed, FoGH could not meet, and volunteering activities stopped. The playground was shut and sports activities ceased. The loss of these activities would not be sustainable in the long term, and in the meantime the park is having to adapt to new ways of offering services and activities safely. This may require more intensive management than in the past.

Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made

The physical difference Parks for People funding has made is obvious: the new hub and play area, the restored Marnock Lake, the wetlands and boardwalk through the woods, the new and restored entrances. Instead of looking unsafe and run-down the park strikes a visitor as attractive, modern and well maintained. Equally importantly, these works have made visible the park's many functions and assets, and especially its importance as a natural landscape and wildlife habitat. The community orchard, volunteering sessions and events organised by FoGH have shown how vital the park can be as a centre of community life, catering for a wide range of interests and age groups. As many participants in this research commented, Grosvenor and Hilbert Park now feels much safer:

'It is much safer now than it used to be when our children were small, you would not have allowed younger children to go there alone. [...] These days I'd have no hesitation at walking through it totally on my own' (Harmony, local resident, 76).

There are differences that are less obvious but as important for local people, which relate to the setting that has now been created for community activity. There are interactions that happen because there is now a proper cafe that would not have happened before; groups can meet at the Hub that previously would not have had anywhere to get together. The park is now a space for events and activities that bring people together and offer the chance for isolated people to make friends or access support. The practical volunteering activities organised by Kent High Weald Partnership enable local people to make a contribution to their community as well as creating spaces for friendship and social activity.

Some of this might have happened without the Parks for People funding, but it would have been patchy and disconnected. The proportion of survey respondents saying the park had improved in the last ten years was striking: 87% said it was better overall, with particular appreciation for the improved buildings and range of activities. In total 95% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the park overall.

Parks for People created a chance to bring together a range of improvements and activities and give them a coherence and sense of direction - and, as the parks manager told us, create a 'useable space' at the heart of the park around which other activities could cluster. While that space will need constant care to stay attractive and provide a base for the park's many activities, the restoration project has created a foundation for a promising future.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Research for this case study took place between January and June 2020. After reviewing the documents related to the project, the researchers visited Grosvenor and Hilbert Park in January 2020 to see the work done and speak to the project lead. They then returned to Tunbridge Wells in the first week of March to interview individuals and groups connected with the park. There were two group interviews:

- 11 members of the Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Park.
- A facilitator and three participants in the Mindwell art group.

There were also nine face-to-face individual interviews, which included two local councillors, two council managers, two park users and three people involved in voluntary and community activities connected to the park. We then interviewed a further 12 park users in early June to discuss their experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown. The individuals interviewed are not a representative sample of the population, but are knowledgeable about the project and the local area and in many cases have been involved in community activities connected with the project. In addition to the interviews, 61 people completed an online survey which was shared by FoGH and other groups.

Appendix 2: About the area

Local Health

	St James' Ward	Tunbridge Wells	England
Limiting long term illness or disability, 2011	11.5%	14.2%	17.6%
Households that experience fuel poverty, 2016	12.8%	9.5%	11.1%
People aged 65 and over living alone, 2011	40.9%	30.5%	31.5%
Life expectancy			
At birth for males, 2013-2017 (years)	79.4	81.6	79.5
At birth for females, 2013-2017 (years)	79.4	84.3	83.1

Source: ONS and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Index of Multiple Deprivation

	2010		2015		2019	
	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile
Tunbridge Wells 009E	24,069	8	29,330	9	28,182	9

Source: English Indices of Deprivation, MHCLG. Note: Data is included at LSOA level (Lower Layer Super Output Area).

Economic Activity

Economic activity rate – aged 16-64	Tunbridge Wells	England
2005	82.8%	76.6%
2010	79.9%	76.3%
2015	76.5%	77.9%
2019	83.4%	79.2%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS.

Note: Data is included parliamentary constituency level (Tunbridge Wells).

Housing Market

Average price paid	2010		2015		2019	
	TN1 2 & TN2 3 postcodes (average)	Tunbridge Wells	TN1 2 & TN2 3 postcodes (average)	Tunbridge Wells	TN1 2 & TN2 3 postcodes (average)	Tunbridge Wells
Detached	£693,867	£659,782	£617,756	£810,098	£759,636	£831,552
Semi-detached	£295,837	£334,174	£422,302	£421,973	£436,660	£488,781
Terraced	£250,442	£276,437	£312,382	£367,692	£363,907	£419,950
Flat/maisonette	£190,334	£199,421	£228,847	£230,594	£254,272	£299,787
Overall average	£267,766	£358,844	£319,186	£434,409	£366,149	£499,981

Source: HM Land Registry.

Photo credits

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