

A restorative space restored: Saughton Park, Edinburgh



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Summary

Saughton Park has a long history as a showpiece for the city of Edinburgh. It was home to the Scottish Exhibition in 1908 and is considered the birthplace of horticultural therapy. But for many years its horticultural heritage was neglected and it was primarily a community recreation ground. Through the Parks for People project its horticultural status has been restored, its heritage has been celebrated and there are now new opportunities for local people to enjoy social events and engage with the rich wildlife around the Water of Leith.

The restoration project has been especially successful in reaching some of the more vulnerable people in the surrounding communities. The park now provides volunteering opportunities for people with mental health problems and learning disabilities. It has become known as a place where refugees and newcomers to Edinburgh are made welcome. People with disabilities can now enjoy all-ability cycling sessions.

Horticulture is celebrated both as therapy and for pleasure. The active and energetic Friends of Saughton Park have their own Physic Garden within the walled garden, while the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society has made the park its headquarters and its annual spring show has become an important event for the local neighbourhood and the wider area.

The project has shown the wealth of talent and energy that exists within communities, even where there are challenges of deprivation and lack of income. It shows how parks can become welcoming places for all sections of society. But it also shows the need for constant care and attention to keep people engaged and enthusiastic, and the importance of making sure local people have a real say in the park's future.

Learning points

1. There is a wealth of capacity within communities, including those in areas with high levels of need. But green spaces are a resource for the people – people should not be seen as a free resource for the spaces.
2. A park can offer a welcoming environment for marginalised people that is undemanding and inclusive.
3. The success of the Saughton Park project has built confidence within City of Edinburgh Council to take on more ambitious work.
4. Relationships and respectful communication are key to long term success.
5. Managing multiple interests requires more intensive work than traditional parks management.
6. Saughton Park's renewable energy project has expanded people's vision of what a park is for and what can be done there.
7. Where expectations have been raised through investment and community engagement, expectations of quality are likely to be higher and poor performance can put a project's reputation at risk.

1. Introduction

1.1 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. It is designed for people involved in parks and green spaces generally, but especially for people who are directly involved in looking after Saughton Park, organising activities in it, or supporting the wider local community in Edinburgh.

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 Saughton 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.

1.2 About Saughton Park

Saughton Park, by some accounts, was the birthplace of horticultural therapy. The land it occupies was formerly the grounds of Saughtonhall House, once a stately home and from 1824 the home of the Institute for the Recovery of the Insane. This Victorian asylum, a private institution for wealthy patients, was notable for using gardening and plant care as part of patients' recovery, as medical professionals began to understand the benefits horticulture could bring to people with severe mental illnesses.

*The National Lottery Community Fund only funded the Parks for People projects in England.

That legacy has found a new expression through the restoration of Saughton Park, which is now almost complete. Where once it catered for the troubles of the well-off, today the park offers a restorative environment for a wide range of people from some of the less affluent parts of Edinburgh. People with mental health problems, people who are lonely or isolated, people with learning difficulties and physical disabilities all find a safe and welcoming space.

It isn't just about horticulture, either. It's often the apparently small things that make a difference. During the restoration project the city council's community worker met a charity that provides modified bikes and cycling lessons for people with disabilities. As a result the park now has storage for bikes and runs regular cycling sessions, and the paths have been designed to accommodate these. As a design intervention it's not particularly high profile, but for the people who can now use the bikes it's a change in the quality of their lives.

As one cycling instructor puts it: 'A lot of people, especially with learning disabilities and autism and stuff, they get quite over-protected to a certain extent with the care and support they get, so they don't really get that opportunity much to feel the wind in their face or take control themselves, so even being on a bike, even a side by side or a trike, even if they're going pretty slow if they're in control it's such a novel and new experience for them to actually make their own decisions... Just being out in the community, we get such positive feedback, they go out and people are saying it's a cool bike and things like that so it's a really positive thing, cycling around in amongst everyone else.'

The 'everyone else' is important too. The therapeutic space is also a social space, because it occurs in the context of a park that aims to make everyone feel at home. It's a community park with the usual facilities - a play area, a skate park, sports pitches. It's a horticultural showpiece, with a formal walled garden and an enclosed Winter Garden, and is now the headquarters of the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society. It's also an important natural space, bordered on one side by the Water of Leith, where otters are now regularly seen not far from the heart of Edinburgh.

1.3 The park and the local area

Saughton Park, covering more than 14 hectares, has been an important space for Edinburgh since at least 1639, when it was the site of Saughtonhall House, a substantial family home. After the house was leased out to become an asylum in the early nineteenth century, the surrounding land was eventually bought to become a public park. The park, including a walled garden, was opened in June 1905.

The park was used for the Scottish Exhibition of 1908, which attracted more than three million visitors and famously ended in a brawl among the crowds when the authorities tried to close the bar early. Saughton Park was always seen as a horticultural gem, with a well-known rose garden dating back to the years after the Scottish Exhibition. But the decades after the second world war saw a long trajectory of decline. Saughtonhall House was burned down in the 1950s, and the bandstand was dismantled and put into storage in 1987 after it had been vandalised. People who know Saughton Park from the last few decades describe it as tired and run-down before the restoration project began. Antisocial behaviour and vandalism were regular problems. People felt the park had been forgotten.

Edinburgh is a wealthy city, but has areas of neglect and deprivation. The area around Saughton Park is not affluent - the Stenhouse and Saughton Mains neighbourhood is among the 30% most deprived in Scotland - and despite being only a short bus ride

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from the city's main tourist attractions and just a hop from Murrayfield Stadium, it feels like a very different city.

To the immediate east of Saughton Park is the Gorgie neighbourhood, one of the more deprived areas of Edinburgh. The head of a local community development charity says this makes Saughton Park all the more important: 'It's a pretty grim area, there's not a lot of light or open space so that's really our place, it's the only beautiful place there really, there are other little parks but they're not special. [...] You think about the Botanics and things like that and it always felt like our bit of Edinburgh was just forgotten really.'

A feeling of being forgotten can lead to a sense of not caring. If the powers that be aren't interested, vandalism or graffiti might be the only difference some people feel they can make. But that can set off a self-reinforcing spiral: the park gets vandalised, so fewer people use it, so the few who are involved in antisocial behaviour dominate the space. Reversing that spiral starts by showing care - not only by investing in the space but by investing in the community.

1.4 About the restoration project

After a period of consultation and planning with residents, community organisations and the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society (known as 'the Caley'), which had historic links with the park, approval for the restoration was granted in 2015. The work, costing just over £4 million, included the refurbishment of the remaining historic outbuildings of Saughtonhall House and their integration into a new mix of workspace and meeting rooms, providing a base for the Caley as well as council parks staff. The walled garden has been completely refurbished to become a showcase for the Caley's work, with a replanted 'Royal Boulevard' providing an impressive entrance.

The bandstand and Winter Garden have been restored, and create spaces for outdoor and indoor events. Paths have been upgraded to enable safe use by cyclists or wheelchair users. In contrast with the formal spaces of the walled garden, the area bordering the Water of Leith is now managed as a natural area to encourage wildlife and biodiversity, and includes a community orchard. New interpretation boards have been put up to explain the park's history and importance.

Alongside the improvements funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the city council has raised funds to create a pioneering renewable energy installation, combining a micro-hydro scheme on the Water of Leith with ground source heat pumps. Together these supply all the energy needed to power the park's buildings.

A further project that could contribute to the improvements in Saughton Park and engagement with the local community is the trialling of a 'physical-digital noticeboard' and data dashboard. This is part of the Rethinking Parks project funded by NESTA. Saughton Park is one of four parks in Edinburgh being used to explore how information gathered from remote sensors or volunteered by park users can be aggregated and displayed to provide information for parks staff and volunteers and additional interest for visitors. A prototype noticeboard has been developed which can display data on which parts of the park are busiest. It also incorporates a bat detector so park users can find out how insect-friendly the surrounding habitat is.

In mid-2020 the Parks for People restoration project was almost complete: the Garden Bistro cafe had finally opened and the last stage of the project was to be a series of community activities facilitated by an events and engagement officer employed by City of Edinburgh Council for two years.

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2. Involving the community

Less than a decade ago there was no community involvement to speak of at Saughton Park. Local football teams used the sports pitches, but took little interest in the rest of the park. At one point a group of local residents formed to oppose the construction of the skate park, but that soon petered out. The Parks for People project, by contrast, has brought together a host of community and voluntary organisations in a dense network of groups that not only provide a strong local voice in the way the park is run, but also make sure the park caters for everyone.

Central to this network is the Friends of Saughton Park (FoSP). When the group formed in 2014 there were seven members. Today there are 400, of whom more than 30 are actively involved in FoSP and the activities they put on. FoSP puts on an apple day and Halloween festival in the autumn, Christmas wreath making and more, sometimes attracting up to 1,000 people to its public events. But the smaller scale matters too. FoSP has taken charge of one area of the walled garden and transformed it into a physic garden, showcasing medicinal herbs and plants. It works closely with the Caley and has created a community orchard beside the Water of Leith, planted early in 2020. The Winter Garden has a regular 'knit and natter' group organised by FoSP, and the Friends' Facebook page keeps them in touch with the wider community in the local area and beyond.

One FoSP member comments:

'It's green space in quite a developed area, it means lots of things to different people, it might be nature, it might just be some green space, it might be some volunteering, [there are] a lot of dog walkers in the area ... It's important that the park has lots of different things going for lots of different groups coming in. We've got a skate park as well, the playpark and there's a new multi-use games area so there's more things to do for young people in the area.'

This variety of activities happens because FoSP has been in regular contact with City of Edinburgh Council and the Caley over the progress of the restoration project and has been closely involved in discussions about design and delivery of the project. But it is also because FoSP itself is an inclusive group that has connected with a wide range of community organisations. These include The Welcoming Association, which works with refugees, asylum seekers and other newcomers to Edinburgh; Health All Round, a community development charity; Garvald, a day centre which provides therapeutic activities for adults with learning difficulties; Redhall Walled Garden, a project run by the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) which specialises in therapeutic horticulture; and Cycling UK, which runs the all-ability cycling sessions.

These projects could exist on their own without making links with the park, but by using the park as a setting for some of their activities they can connect with each other and, via FoSP, influence decisions about the park's management and events programme.

The fact that Saughton Park is also now the Caley's base changes the dynamic of working relationships. While traditionally Edinburgh Council had quite a paternalistic approach to its green spaces, FoSP and the Caley are clear that they want a say in decisions. This isn't always comfortable for the council, as one of the Caley's members comments:

'So the friends and the Caley are probably, because we are there onsite we're quite strong, so I think it's a different way of working for the council, I think that's why it's hard. But what works well is, certainly the way we as a team work with

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the gardener onsite is extremely important. For example we'll do extra dig days where we bring in some Caley members and have a blitz on an area which boosts the capacity of the park to cope with its enhanced features now.'

Other local organisations are less closely involved, but are clear that they too want to have their say on the park's future. Health All Round is closely connected with the Gorgie and Dalry Forum, the community forum that represents part of the local area, and through the forum has fed into the restoration process and local consultations.

There is probably more that can be done, though. Alongside this case study we carried out an online survey, with 157 responses from people who were interested in the park or used it. While they were very satisfied with the improvements – 78% of respondents were very satisfied overall – fewer than half (45%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of influence they had.

3. Improving health and wellbeing

Michael¹ has been recovering from severe mental health problems for several years. His recovery journey took him from a hospital ward to Lothlorien, a residential community in Dumfries and Galloway that specialises in therapeutic horticulture. After three years there he returned to Edinburgh and got involved in the work at Redhall Walled Garden. But often for people who need support to bring stability into their lives, it can be hard to find the next step in recovery. After a year and a half at Redhall, Michael got a volunteering placement with the head gardener at Saughton Park, and he has now been a regular volunteer there for more than a year.

Michael says that even at his worst point being out in a garden environment was helpful:

‘Even when I was in psychiatric hospitals we used to have some garden projects and that time away from the ward was just, you could actually switch off for about an hour... It’s clinically proven that it does help and I think the big thing for me was when you’re working at Redhall you’re in quite a supportive environment, so you’re helping other people and you’re still involved in mental health and everyone talks about their mental health.’

‘The big thing about moving onto Saughton was that it was totally unrelated to mental health where I was meeting new people, I was building my confidence up, people who didn’t know anything about my history, so that was a great thing to build up my confidence and self-esteem.’

Michael hopes ultimately to get a job as part of the parks team. But in the meantime he finds Saughton Park helpful both as a space to work in and as a space to enjoy:

‘the big herbaceous border, the big Royal Boulevard, as it’s called, is quite stunning and then you’ve got the bandstand as well which is very unusual and the Italian garden is just beautiful, you’ve got all the yew hedges and then the rose garden as well, the rose garden when it’s in flower is just absolutely stunning ... there’s different areas where people can go and just be in nature and have some time for themselves.’

Michael’s experience illustrates the way Saughton Park provides much more than an enjoyable open space. For vulnerable people in a community, it offers networks of support and opportunities to connect with others. This happens informally through groups like FoSP as well as through specialist organisations like Redhall. One project worker points out:

‘There’s evidence of quite a diversity of mental health challenges ... and I’m aware of how people are supported and in a very soft and beautiful way. Individuals that maybe are more fragile, are on the more vulnerable spectrum and they are welcome and I think it’s the personalities that are involved that are very skilled, using humour, using work as a way of making sure people are part of that community.’

That sense of welcome and acceptance has created a climate where organisations with a more formal health and wellbeing role can use Saughton Park for their activities.

¹ Not his real name.

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Garvald, which works with people with learning disabilities, has a group that volunteers in the park once a week in the summer, helping the head gardener with basic maintenance tasks and learning to use tools. Redhall arranges placements for six to eight weeks for people wanting to volunteer as part of their mental health recovery plan. Health All Round organises walking groups that use the park, and has had help from the parks staff on its own community allotment. Cycling UK creates opportunities for people with various disabilities to get out and meet others in the park.

The health benefits of the park aren't just about the formal organisations and activities, important as these are. One of the Caley members comments: *'[The restoration is] definitely encouraging more people to be out and about [...] One of the school groups that comes in is a group of quite seriously autistic children, they've all got a one to one helper, and they don't get out much so I think that is absolutely critical for them.'*

It's important to recognise that health benefits are felt by the everyday users of the park as well as those with specific health needs. Just over half the respondents to our online survey said their physical or mental health had improved because of the park (52% in each case).

4. Bringing people together

In 2015 Scotland began to accept refugees from the Syrian civil war as part of the international resettlement programme. In Edinburgh a key link organisation was The Welcoming Association, which exists to support newcomers arriving in the city. Many of them have settled in the neighbourhoods near Saughton Park, and the Welcoming Association is just a short walk from the park in Gorgie.

During the park restoration project the Welcoming Association developed close links with FoSP, and it has run various events designed to bring different communities together. These include 'climate challenge' events to discuss local responses to climate change, as well as celebrations of traditional community festivals such as Eid. These offered a perfect opportunity to create closer connections between the new Syrian community and long-term local residents, as one of the association's staff explains:

'People were just naturally curious and because the whole Syrian programme nationwide has had such huge publicity and a lot of interest to support and befriend and help, people were very keen to meet and get to understand more about this new community and the community themselves were very keen to be part of something. Mainly the younger Syrians were in college or learning English or looking for work and really wanted to be part of the community and feel valued and appreciated and to contribute something back because they felt they'd been given a lot of support and kindness.'

The Syrian cooking, music and hospitality provided at these events drew in local people and showed that refugees could play a leading role in the community. The climate challenge events are continuing and the Welcoming Association can draw on people from more than 60 nationalities, many of whom had experience in climate change issues from their home countries.

The sense of all being welcome and included is evident too from the all-ability cycling. One organiser explained the joy it brings to people with learning disabilities:

'Just being in the park itself, when you're riding along and having such fun and people see that, the feedback that you get from folk about the bikes, even when they're going past the skate park and the kids are always giving them a cheer and stuff. It's such a good thing, it's making disability visible and people seeing it's not necessarily a barrier to getting out and having fun.'

When the cafe is fully functioning that sense of inclusion may be strengthened because people can sit together in the same space; until now there have been few under-cover areas where people can shelter from the wind or simply stop and chat. The interactions between the various groups that use the park provide opportunities for new connections - the Caley, for example, is keen to share its horticultural knowledge with local residents, while the cafe owner would like to source fresh food from the Caley's vegetable beds. The bandstand provides a space where local musicians can perform, which in turn brings people into the park who might not otherwise venture in.

As important as the organised events and activities is the general sense of safety that now exists. One council officer comments:

'What you've moved from is a park that was basically, from a certain point in the evening it was a breeding ground for antisocial behaviour, whereas now it's a park that's used by the wider community, it's a welcoming space, it's a place people

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can feel quite safe in and comfortable in. I think it's something that the community has a lot of pride in.'

5. Engaging with nature and the environment

Talk to local people about Saughton Park and chances are that sooner or later they'll mention the otters. There never used to be otters in the Water of Leith, the small river that flows through Edinburgh from the Pentland Hills in the southwest to the port of Leith. Now they've been seen in the heart of the city, and Saughton Park is a favourite place for otter-spotting.

The otters didn't return because of the park restoration project, but the restoration project has brought them to people's notice. The border of the park by the Water of Leith was previously overgrown and neglected. Now it has been set apart as a naturalised area to encourage wildlife and biodiversity. A wild orchard has been planted to attract pollinators, and as local residents have begun to explore the park the appreciation of the nature on their doorstep has grown. One member of FoSP says children are particularly fascinated by Saughton Park's wildlife:

'We've got otters on the water beside the park, we'd got kingfishers last year and the kids were amazed by the sheer volume of bumble bees in the park this year, we've been looking at ladybirds in the park, we've been looking at the birds of the park. Just the connection to nature, and it gives you a chance to relax somewhere in a green space.'

This appreciation is important for some of the park's more vulnerable users. A staff member from Garvald comments:

'People get really excited about seeing nature and seeing animals, cos you don't see them as much and these walks give people a chance to see squirrels, even squirrels become really exciting for people and we often see the ducks and hear the birds and that can be very relaxing for people to hear them and to see them.'

The Water of Leith also forms part of an important wildlife corridor, offering a green route into and through the city centre. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents to our survey (73%) said they were more connected to nature because of the park.

The more formal horticultural aspects of the park also provide opportunities for people to get involved in growing and engaging with the natural environment, whether in the physic garden run by FoSP or in the Caley's more traditional botanical activities.

Saughton Park's renewable energy project addresses another side of environmental awareness and engagement. The recently-opened micro hydro scheme on the Water of Leith, combined with a ground source heat pump installation, supplies all the power needed within the park and is being used as an exemplar of how Scottish green spaces can contribute to urban decarbonisation. It also helps to put Saughton Park on the map as a pioneer of new ideas, as a FoSP member says:

'It's really important because it sets us apart from every other park. We've got people coming in specifically to see it and the fact that it's all renewable energy within the park, I think it's very important because they're new technologies that really are at the forefront of what's going on with climate change and everything else.'

6. Reducing inequalities

The presence of a park does not make a city more equal, but it can mitigate the social and economic inequalities that exist in a city. It can open up space for relaxation and play and quiet for people who do not have space at home, or whose lives are stressed by lack of income or poor health. The immediate local neighbourhoods of Gorgie and Stenhouse are among the most deprived 30% in Scotland. They are not Edinburgh's poorest areas, but residents face the daily struggles of getting by on relatively low incomes in a rich city. Crime, insecure employment and poor health are common.

The amount of care a park receives can help to address these inequalities. A looked-after park is less likely to attract crime and antisocial behaviour, and offers health-enhancing activities. But perhaps as important as the organised activities is the message that a cared-for place sends to local residents, as one community worker explains:

'With a place like Edinburgh which is so high in inequality, it's so stark, Princes Street being that fairytale city atmosphere and five minutes on the bus you're in Gorgie Road, there's a very clear message there about who matters. So I think in a way the park challenges that and to me it's like you matter too and you deserve a beautiful place too.'

The restoration creates a sense that local people deserve something as good as the rest of the city. A mental health professional comments:

'It looks amazing now and looks like something that the local people can be proud of as well, because it is a deprived area, it does generally get forgotten about, that part of Edinburgh.'

A council officer echoes the comment that the local community are proud of Saughton Park.

'They view it extremely differently now, there's an investment there within the local community, it's used by various community groups and individuals, whereas before the project from certain points in the evening most people wouldn't go there 'cos they wouldn't have felt very safe.'

Not only is the park restoration putting the park and its surrounding neighbourhoods on the map, but it is also providing opportunities to address less visible inequalities - the prevalence of mental health problems, for example, or the barriers to community life faced by migrants or refugees. While the park itself doesn't change these challenges, it can provide a setting for activities that address them.

7. Supporting the local economy

One of the last pieces of the Saughton Park jigsaw to fall into place was the opening of the new cafe, which had been beset with contractual problems and delays. It had been scheduled to open in March 2020, but then the Covid-19 lockdown was imposed.

The cafe is an important part of the project because there are very few alternative facilities in the local neighbourhood. There's a Greggs and another baker half a mile from the park, supermarkets and a few pubs, but nowhere local to sit and relax. A senior council officer says:

'The difficulty with the local economy is there isn't really a great deal of business around, there's a prison and the rest is largely residential and [there's] a school in the immediate environment. One of the reasons we wanted to do something at Saughton Park was because there weren't really any community facilities locally and in our feedback people were saying we'd like a café in the area. [...] I would say the park will be the local economy basically.'

This is not only about providing a cafe, but also about the range of activities that the cafe can support, along with the spaces that will be available for hire to local groups. As the park becomes a local hub it could host more business activities, including public and private events. The cafe's manager says that although the area is relatively deprived, there's a wide range of potential customers:

'We're not going to be £1 for a cup of tea in a polystyrene cup type of operation, it's not that, we're going to try and have a daily audience which is probably a café snack type thing, but we'll run evening events which are more restaurant type class stuff and they'll pay accordingly for that. We're trying to tailor the menu so there's a bit for everybody ... you could get mussels as a starter or just a cheese and pickle sandwich, so hopefully there's a bit for everybody.'

He is enthusiastic about the potential for events to bring in more people who will spend money locally:

'I remember a few years ago going with my daughter on a teddy bear hunt at Easter and I think they got about 1000 people at it, it was brilliant. These type of things prove that there's a market for people to do things outdoors and I think if we can get our offer right in the bistro then I think we'll certainly enhance everything that the park has been doing or is going to offer.'

Music and performances are potential crowd-pullers, and while these need to be managed to avoid disrupting community activities, they offer a chance to put the park at the heart of the local arts and music scene.

The restoration project has also created opportunities for people to improve their skills and employment prospects. Volunteering placements enable people who lack confidence to develop the skills to re-engage with the labour market, or enable them to better manage long-term health conditions.

In the longer term, the park's renewable energy scheme could also contribute to the local economy. While it doesn't create jobs it does show the potential for renewable energy in Scotland's green spaces, and as an exemplar project is likely to attract a steady stream of visitors. This could have an impact across Edinburgh and beyond.

8. Saughton Park during Covid-19

During the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020, we interviewed seven park users to find out more about what they valued about Saughton Park and how restrictions on movement and activities were affecting them. Their experiences are summarised below. As well as affecting park users, the lockdown also further delayed the opening of the Garden Bistro; there was also reduced staffing on-site at first and the walled garden was closed to the public.

Interviewees:²

- **Mark and Frances**, a student couple living in Edinburgh city centre, and members of the Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society.
- **Joanna**, 55, an administrator living in Leith but working at Saughton Park.
- **Graeme**, 42, a regular user of Saughton Park as a dog walker.
- **David**, 50s, retired, has lived near Saughton Park with his wife for past 30 years, and is a member of FoSP.
- **Orla**, 39, lives locally with her husband and two young children.
- **Callum**, 46, lives a five minute walk from the park and volunteers there regularly.

8.1 Before lockdown

Mark and Frances have a gardening plot in the walled garden where they would work every week. They would take part in planting demonstrations and events run by the Caley, such as the Spring Show. Callum volunteered for the Caley and prior to lockdown he was a daily visitor to the walled gardens, where he worked in the natural garden. David and his wife were members of FoSP and helped to organise two or three events a year in the park. They often use the space to walk, to socialise with other users and to enjoy the walled gardens. Graeme used the park most often for dog walking, and for taking an evening walk when the weather was good. Orla and her young family would use the skate park, playground, and the outdoor gym equipment. Orla said there was a wide range of activities that could keep the family entertained for a whole morning.

For the keen horticulturalists, such as Mark, Frances, Joanna and Callum, the most important aspects of the park were the walled garden area, both for their planting and growing and for relaxation. David commented that he and his wife would often sit in the walled garden to enjoy the *'amazing tranquillity that exists there'*.

David described how he and his wife had made friends through the community groups in Saughton Park. Callum also highlighted the importance of the community activities in the park, and the social contact he had through his volunteering work.

All the interviewees said that being able to use green, outdoor space was good for their mental and physical health. For Orla, as a parent of young children, going for a

² All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

*The National Lottery Community Fund only funded the Parks for People projects in England.

run in the park was very important - *'sixty minutes to myself in a green space, it's hugely helpful for my wellbeing just to have that time'*.

8.2 During the lockdown

Most interviewees reported that their use of green spaces had increased, but their patterns of activity had changed. For those who did not live close to Saughton Park, other green spaces became more important.

The walled garden was closed at the start of the lockdown. Mark, Frances, Joanna and Callum were most affected by this. They variously reported feeling frustrated, sad and stressed by not being able to take part in their usual activities. Callum described the closure of the walled garden as *'a bit of a shock to the system'*, as his volunteering there was important in the way that he structured his days and maintained his wellbeing. For Orla and her young children, the closure of the skate park, playground and outdoor gym equipment had a significant impact. Orla said it was difficult to take the children to Saughton Park while these facilities were shut, because it was hard for children their age to understand the rules around social distancing.

As a dog walker, Graeme was less affected by the lockdown. He described having more *'freedom to roam'* because sports pitches and playing fields were closed. David, similarly, reported that *'we've had the freedom of the whole park'*. Graeme and David both said they used the park more frequently and often for longer than normal during lockdown, as it stood in for exercise and leisure time that they would otherwise have got through trips to town, or journeying between meetings.

Orla said her family had substituted bike rides for their usual activities in play areas:

'Moving my daughter from a scooter onto a bike has been a big one for us [...] So, we've kind of focused on what we can do which was the cycling, and so we went out for our first ever bike ride as a family [...] I've seen loads of people cycling that I've never seen cycling before, that's definitely a big thing right now in Edinburgh, everybody is teaching their kids to ride a bike.'

Graeme and Callum also said they had started cycling much more. Orla also found the park offered an important personal space during the lockdown:

'I feel that that space has given me something ... like freedom and time away from the house, it's just like refreshing.'

Mark and Frances were the exception, reporting that they had both used far fewer green spaces, and less often than usual. For them, Saughton Park was a bus ride away and a trip to the park would not constitute an essential journey. They both reported that they missed Saughton Park, their gardening plot, and their time spent outside a great deal. As they didn't have access to a garden space at home, they had taken up indoor activities such as painting, cooking and baking. Along with Orla and Joanna, they commented that the lockdown had made them appreciate the importance and quality of green spaces.

The only negative comments about park users were from David, who said he had noticed Saughton Park being used for *'gatherings in the evening fuelled by alcohol'*, and that vandalism was occurring. Some similar concerns were expressed on social media by park users during the lockdown, indicating that at least some users felt less comfortable about going there.

9. Opportunities and challenges

The Saughton Park project highlights several opportunities and challenges for the future. The investment in the park and clear visual impact of the restoration creates a sense of expectation and anticipation, which is reinforced by the high level of engagement with local community organisations. From being a neglected space, Saughton Park is now seen as somewhere for the whole community and a space where community members can exercise some influence. However, to sustain this interest and excitement the city council and its partners will need to keep maintaining it to its current standard.

- A therapeutic park: wellbeing is an important part of Saughton Park's history and its contemporary identity. The legacy of Saughtonhall House has found new expressions in the work of organisations such as SAMH, Garvald and Health All Round, and the activities of FoSP and the Caley. There are opportunities to build on this, linking with healthcare providers and GPs to use the park to support recovery from physical and mental illness and providing long term investment in activities that support health and wellbeing.
- Community involvement: Over the course of the restoration there has been a high degree of community engagement and local people now see the park as a space that is theirs. However, the survey shows a sense that more can be done. To increase levels of positivity, local residents will need to feel they can influence and inform what happens in the park. This may demand different ways of working from the council and a greater openness to local views about how the park should be managed.
- Events and festivals: Saughton Park is beginning to build a reputation for the quality and variety of its events. These have been largely driven by the local community and organisations such as the Caley which are embedded in the park. Community organisations and the council will need to work together closely to create a lively and inclusive events programme for the future, and avoid the risk of seeing events primarily as income-generating activities.
- Horticultural heritage: The arrival of the Caley in Saughton Park has provided an opportunity to rediscover and share its important horticultural heritage. This has excited and interested local residents. The challenge is to keep investing in the park so this excitement can grow, and to involve a wider cross-section of the community in horticultural activities.
- Management: The increasing intensity of activity means there will be more demands on the space and facilities, and thus potential for conflict between different users and groups. This needs to be handled sensitively and fairly to make sure that nobody feels excluded and facilities are used responsibly.
- Climate change and environmental activities: Saughton Park is a testbed for new approaches to energy generation in green spaces. It is important to capture the learning from the current renewable energy programme and to explore a wide range of opportunities to use green space as a setting for responding to the climate crisis. These opportunities could include a range of community activities as well as technology-led solutions such as micro hydro.
- Long term care and maintenance: Saughton Park is prone to damage and vandalism, and could easily become neglected again if incidents are not addressed promptly. To reduce the risk of damage there needs to be a strong council and community presence on site, and any damage that does occur needs to be quickly repaired. One of the key achievements of the restoration project has been to show local people that they matter, but this message needs to be

reinforced with a higher level of long term care than Saughton Park has enjoyed in the past.

10. Learning points

1. There is a wealth of capacity within communities. This is not only an attribute of more affluent areas. In areas where there are high levels of need, there is an abundance of activity and capability which can contribute to the development and future of green spaces. But the spaces should be seen as a resource for the people, rather than simply expecting the people to become a resource for the upkeep of the space.
2. A park can offer a welcoming environment for marginalised people that is undemanding and inclusive. Saughton Park has provided a place where Edinburgh's Syrian community can feel welcome and where people with disabilities can enjoy themselves. Parks management is often viewed as a matter of managing problems, but at its best it is about creating new opportunities.
3. The success of the Saughton Park project has built confidence within City of Edinburgh Council to take on more ambitious work - the city is involved in the nationwide Future Parks project to develop a 25-year vision for the future of Edinburgh's parks, and is developing further ideas for generating renewable energy in green spaces. Like community organisations, council officers need permission and resources to be imaginative and innovative.
4. Relationships and respectful communication are key to long term success. Prominent individuals at Saughton Park got to know each other and worked closely together over several years, and the respect generated through this co-working helped them through difficult patches when things didn't proceed according to plan.
5. Managing multiple interests requires more intensive work than traditional parks management. This is challenging at a time when public services are still under pressure to cut costs. It takes time to build trust and to involve communities in decisions.
6. Saughton Park's renewable energy project has expanded people's vision of what a park is for and what can be done there. This would not have happened without a willingness to take risks and accept the possibility of failure.
7. One of the weaknesses of the late stages of the restoration project was that contracts were not delivered on time or to the expected standard. This affected key elements of the project including the cafe and toilets. Where expectations have been raised through investment and community engagement, expectations of quality are likely to be higher and poor performance can put a project's reputation at risk.

11. Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made

There is no single illustration that sums up the difference the Saughton Park restoration project has made. As our interviews revealed, for some the difference is captured in the stunning planting displays and the number of people who attend the Caley's spring show. For others it's the otters and kingfishers at the Water of Leith. Others will talk about the joy on the faces of cyclists with learning difficulties as they ride around the park. Bringing the themes of this case study together, you could describe the achievement as a combined product of activity, access and ambition.

Activity matters because having a lot of people doing a wide variety of things is more likely to generate momentum and connections than a single organisation running a programme of events. When several groups or organisations have a stake in a space, they begin to share contacts and find areas of common interest. The wider the range of activities hosted within the park, whether it's a 'knit and natter' group or a tree-planting day, the more likely the park is to connect with its local community.

Access is the second factor. Not all activities need to be funded through the parks service, but it is important to create a climate where people and organisations feel welcome to use the space. Having a variety of spaces - from a meeting room to the cafe and the Winter Garden - where people can get together helps to build a social ecology. People begin to feel welcome, whatever they need or can contribute. Instead of existing in separate locations and never interacting, groups start to network together, and the park becomes the centre of this emerging social network.

The third element of Saughton Park's success is a level of ambition - not just the ambition to ask for the funds to deliver a project, but an ambition of what the park could become that includes renewable energy as well as horticulture, and an eye on the future of parks as well as the heritage of their past.

It is too early to know the long term difference the Saughton Park project will make, because it has still not concluded. But the signs are positive: 78% of respondents to our survey were very satisfied with the park overall, and 92% felt it had improved over the last ten years. More than three-quarters (77%) were using the park more or significantly more. So foundations have been put in place that could make a long-term difference to the benefits it brings to communities that for too long have felt they have been forgotten.

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 Saughton Park in January 2020 to see the work done and speak to the project lead. Because of Covid-19 restrictions the remaining work was done remotely. In March and April 2020 we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 individuals connected with the park. These included four council officers; eight members of voluntary or community organisations; one business owner and one volunteer. We then interviewed a further seven park users in May and early June to discuss their experiences of Saughton Park 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 to the project. In addition to the interviews, 157 people completed an online survey which was shared by Friends of Saughton Park and other groups.

Appendix 2: About the area

Local Health

	Stenhouse & Saughton Mains	Edinburgh South West	Scotland
Early deaths from coronary heart disease (CHD), aged <75 years, per 100,000 pop., 2016-2018	85	43	52
Multiple emergency hospital admissions, aged >65 years, per 100,000 pop., 2016-2018	7523	4817	5429
Single adult dwellings, 2019	48.0%	38.6%	37.5%
Life expectancy			
At birth for males, 2016	71.8	79.0	77.0
At birth for females, 2016	77.8	83.2	81.1

Source: The Scottish Public Health Observatory (ScotPHO).

Index of Multiple Deprivation

	2012		2016		2020	
	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile
Stenhouse & Saughton Mains	1,767	3	1,368	2	1,465	3

Source: Scottish Indices of Deprivation.

Note: Data is included at Datazone level.

Economic Activity

Economic activity rate – aged 16-64	Edinburgh South West	Scotland
2005	78.4%	77.1%
2010	78.1%	77.0%
2015	70.1%	77.7%
2019	76.8%	77.5%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS.

Note: Data is included UK parliamentary constituency level (Edinburgh South West).

Housing Market

	2010		2015		2018	
	Edinburgh South West	Edinburgh	Edinburgh South West	Edinburgh	Edinburgh South West	Edinburgh
Average residential property price	£189,452	£219,084	£204,394	£238,258	£248,181	£268,206

Source: Registers of Scotland.

*The National Lottery Community Fund only funded the Parks for People projects in England.