

Ethnic Communities and Involvement in Green Spaces
BEN Focus Group - Birmingham

Date: Wednesday 15th January 2003

Venue: Community Nursery, Balsall Heath

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Balsall Heath lies 2 miles South of Birmingham City Centre, an area which has become home to a succession of immigrant communities including Irish, Pakistani and the African-Caribbean community.

Balsall Heath Forum was set up in mid 90's to address a number of local concerns about the areas decline .It acts as an umbrella for over 50 residents groups, faith and voluntary organisations in the area.

A wide range of community activities have been developed initiated by the local community under the forum's banner including a number of environmental projects. This has included an annual spring clean, parks improvement and new street furniture. The Environmental Task Force was set up to lead on this in Balsall Heath and inspire the local community. The Forum has also been a regional and national winner in the Urban Britain in Bloom and Britain in Bloom competition.

Note – the group consisted of staff and trainees from the forums' environmental and area maintenance team with varying degrees of knowledge. The questions were broadened both to look at their ideas as trainees and as members of the Balsall Heath community.

2. How many of you were interested in green spaces before we asked you to be involved in this focus group?

6/10

2. What is a green space? Please name some different kinds of green spaces.

Contributions came from the whole group. The ideas initially were space within their immediate area, but as they opened up so the countryside and other formal and informal spaces were referred to.

There was recognition that all these spaces have some impact on their lives and those of the communities in which they live both real and aspirational.

Parks, gardens, anywhere with grass, open land, Scottish Highlands, disused land, allotments, tree nursery, woodlands, and farms

3. How have you used green spaces?

“Green spaces are used more and more by the community as they see us cleaning up the area, and we have talked to them about why we are doing it”

The group felt that though there was a changing attitude towards green space in the local area, people were still not really making use of other green spaces elsewhere unless they were linked to a community event.

The group identified a number of ways that green space was being used. They were:

Picnics
Sports
Taking brother for a walk
Social events – carnival
Fireworks display
Communal space – used for protest meeting over loss of green space
Growing fruit & vegetables
Walking the dog
Providing spaces to meet friends

4. What would you like to see or do in green spaces?

“People want to feel that it is safe to go in to the parks”

“We have organised football tournaments for the kids in Balsall Heath”

“We have planted flowers and trees on some of the bits of land nobody wanted. People asked us why and we told them. Now they are coming to us to ask if we can do the same for them”

A wide range of activities were suggested by the group including:

Football	Planting flowers/gardening, vegetables
Exercise	Sport
Walking	Taking the kids out
Chances to relieve stress	Sunbathing
Picnics	Tai Chi
More young people using it	Increased safety
Improved facilities – benches, swings etc	

5. If you have been involved in the care, improvement or creation of green spaces, please tell us about what you did.

“I have all been involved in care, improvement and creation of green spaces. When I started people thought I was doing it as part of community service – for doing some crime – they thought I was a criminal. But after a while when they saw me out there regularly they started to ask me what I was doing and taking an interest”.

Examples of work done by the group (As they are part of the Balsall Heath Forum's maintenance team the work was very focused on the local area as were the examples):

Worked on planting flowers and other plants in the parks

Developing recycling facilities in George Street Park

Organising picnics & barbecues for the local community

Training & teaching others horticulture, gardening skills & grounds maintenance

Developing sports activities

Developed 'confused' spaces' project – tidying up and replanting of pieces of land in the area with no clear ownership.

6. What puts you off using green spaces?

A number of issues were highlighted:

Fear of abuse

Dirty/muddy

Drugs

Dumping – this has reduced but people are still wary

Do not feel safe

Poor lighting

Rats – due to people dumping food or feeding birds

Lack of space for organising own activities

“The biggest barrier was the feeling that no one cared about the parks and so they were not safe places to go. This is changing with the work we are doing and people are more interested”

7. What puts you off getting involved in the care and improvement of green spaces?

“People see this sort of work as not having high status. Digging and cleaning up after someone is the job of someone else”

Hard work

Getting dirty

No future – lack of jobs/money/career opportunities

Stigma – seen as low status by others

This is strengthened further by the image of volunteering –pressure from friends, image – thought (at least initially) to be community service by locals– seen as criminals. But continued presence and talking to people – perceptions changing.

8. What puts you off getting involved in the creation of green spaces?

Within the area the issue is more about any space being available to create more green space.

9. What would encourage you to get more involved?

Personal /Social

Making links with health and fitness issues

Personal benefit – jobs/money

Variety of opportunities/work

Plants & flowers that are representative of the culture and history of the people living locally

Community

Working with schools – get them when they are young

Incentives/appreciation – people will then develop a sense of responsibility

Local competitions- 5 parks in the area – use local pride to encourage people

Actively encouraging people to input their ideas and seeing them happen

Facilities/Resources

Park furniture – built locally

More planters around the area

10. Is there anything that you want to add?

“Interest in the parks has been generated by what we have been doing – residents have requested things to be done in their own area, or in their gardens”

“Park wardens and community wardens have made the place feel safer so people are coming out and using the park and green spaces.

“People will get involved if someone has provided the starting point”

Conclusions

The group showed a real enthusiasm for what they were doing, and there was feeling of pride in the comments and support that local people were showing in their work. Through their involvement with improving green spaces they had seen a change of attitude and feeling people recognising the benefits. However the work needs to be formally recognised by outside bodies such as the council and others, as much of the work should fall under their remit, and resources need to be made available for the work to continue and expand.

Introductions – round of names and where you're from,
Briefly tell us something about yourself or your links to the forum

Explain why we're doing this
Get your views
Base our work on
Put them across to decision makers

A question – no particular order – prompts

James will take notes
Tape recorder – helps with reporting – won't be able to trace back
comments to individuals
Please talk one at a time – no interruptions
Get your views – all points of view are valid – let people finish what
they have to say

Draft will be sent out – in case we've missed anything or miss-quoted
you

Is everyone OK with this process? Do you have any questions about
the focus group?
Now or later if anything comes up.