

The Waterside Community Project

Tacking anti-social behaviour in the New Forest



The Waterside Community is in one of the UK's most beautiful environments. Easily accessible and very popular with local residents and tourists, the New Forest offers a breathtaking and diverse landscape in which to walk, relax and play. However poverty, unemployment, and poor education in the area contribute towards anti-social behaviour that spills out into the forest. The Waterside Community Project aims to tackle some of these issues, and reduce woodland vandalism, by employing a dedicated Ranger to make contact with the community's youth and inspire them to appreciate and respect 'their' woodlands.

objectives

- To remove mental and physical barriers to using the New Forest by making it a safe place to visit and by building a bond of mutual trust and respect between the Forestry Commission and the Waterside Community.
- To promote responsible use of the Forest and deter anti-social behaviour.
- To contribute towards a healthier and happier Waterside community by improving the confidence, quality of life and self-esteem of local young people.
- To instil in local residents a sense of pride in, and ownership of, the New Forest.

actions

- Employment of a Community Ranger to work with existing groups and partners (inc. the Handy Trust) establish links with young people and families within the Waterside Community, and be a visible and approachable presence on site.
- Producing a communications strategy and publicly launching the scheme.
- Establishing and working with a stakeholders group to identify the recreational needs of the whole community.
- Developing an education programme of activities and events that help young people to appreciate the forest and its wildlife, including: Child of the Wild Club (7-12 years); conservation-related activities such as nest building; and fishing, where teenage offenders clear forest rides in return for fishing trips.
- Working with the police and fire service to promote responsible use of the forest.

achievements

The Ranger has been very successful in forging vital links with the community by interacting with individuals on site, and through visits to schools and groups. Including:

- Handy Trusts events - an "open house" where young people talk to the ranger about their issues such as school, exams, careers, and boyfriend troubles!
- Recognition from local children, who know the ranger, ask about the woods, and join her for walks through the reserve.
- Being trusted by local children: some of whom are unhappy about the issues in their area, and speak (anonymously) to the rangers about incidents and who is responsible. This has been provided as intelligence to the police on occasions.

As an example of improvements to an individual's behaviour - a nine year-old compulsive fire-lighter, who used to constantly set light to bushes as he passed, attended a conservation event with his friends. Whilst in the forest a few days later he was just about to set light to a bush when a friend reminded him that if he did that the snakes would have nowhere to live. He put the lighter back in his pocket.

background

The Waterside is made up of a number of towns and villages bordering the eastern edge of the New Forest. It is an area that suffers many of the issues associated with urban deprivation - low income, lone parent families, unemployment, and a lack of education. As the population expands, anti-social behaviour increases both in town and out into the neighbouring natural environment. Arson, motorcycling, drug-abuse, and 'raves' are just some of the problems the New Forest Keeper has encountered over the past 20 years. For example, over 100 fires were started in the space of four months, and eight cars were stolen and set alight in the forest in one night alone. The Keeper records incidents, and endeavours to address these problems by working with the police and fire service. An Arson Forum - Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, the New Forest, Hampshire Police, Concern NF East and the Forestry Commission - have had some success in reducing the number of fires. However, it has proved harder to engage the local community in establishing effective and sustainable solutions.

The Handy Trust specialises in youth outreach to meet the aims of 'Every Child Matters,' the Government's target for every child to be safe, healthy and achieve their potential. They have worked for years in the Waterside establishing community links and providing opportunities for young people to improve their lives. In working closely with the Handy Trust, the Forestry Commission aims to participate in an open dialogue with those responsible for vandalising the forest, gain their trust and encourage them to participate in activities that will benefit the environment and the community. An environmental education programme targeted at young children will help to combat the negative influence of older youths, and encourage their peers to have a more positive attitude towards the forest. A dedicated Community Ranger onsite and visiting the community allows for a closer interaction with the residents. Establishing a volunteer group (currently 50-60 members) to help run activities and continue supporting the community will have a more lasting effect when the project comes to an end.

quotes

"The Handy Trust, [and partners] have teamed up to protect young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life. Children from "The Child of the Wild" project have far more say about issues that affect them as individuals and collectively. Keeping in mind that they live in an area of social deprivation we decided to tackle one of the areas of disadvantage, build relationships with these children and help identify at an early stage young people at risk of social exclusion. As a team we make sure they get the support they need to achieve their potential."
Candy Huxham, The Handy Trust.

partners

Esso
Forestry Commission
The Handy Trust

funding

Total	£91,266
Sustainable Development Fund	£40,748
Esso	£30,000
Forestry Commission (in-kind)	£20,518

lessons learnt

- It has taken years for the Handy Trust to establish links with the Waterside community, and build a relationship of trust and understanding; the partnership has been crucial to FC overcoming the 'defensive' attitude of disengaged youths and the mistrust of authority figures.
- the project has to be sustainable, and the team have worked closely with volunteers to help run events and sessions - some were recently recruited from Waterside.
- Younger children are more likely to understand and appreciate the importance of looking after the forest and take that message home to family and friends.