

The impact of trees on the well-being of residents on two inner-London social housing estates

A range of studies have outlined the importance of trees and woodlands and the benefits and opportunities for recreation, social capital, learning, health and well-being that they can provide. This research focused on Peabody Hill Wood, a three-hectare woodland situated between two social housing estates in Lambeth, inner London. The five-month project started in late 2004 and explored the ways in which people on both housing estates valued green space and the woodland. As found in a number of other studies, the research highlights that woodlands near to where people live are valuable spaces that can play a significant role in providing opportunities for those living in deprived areas to have contact with nature. A key implication of the work suggests that housing associations can have an important role to play in green space management, particularly in urban areas.



Background

Peabody Hill Wood and the two social housing estates are owned by Peabody Trust, one of London's oldest and largest housing associations. Most of the Trust's residents do not have access to a private garden. In 2000, the government made a commitment to ensure that all social housing meets set standards of decency by 2010. At present, there is no monitoring of the way housing associations manage their green spaces and these areas are not a priority for them. The Peabody Trust decided to develop a partnership with Trees for Cities, Forest Research and the Forestry Commission to gain a better understanding of residents' views of their local wood.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore the ways in which people on both estates value green space in their area, particularly Peabody Hill
- identify levels of usage of Peabody Hill Wood and barriers to accessing it
- engage residents in a walk through the wood to gain their views of it
- engage residents in a woodland clearance day

"I consider the planting of trees a vital part of a better environment for all tenants and particularly children on the estate"

Resident of Peabody Hill Estate

Methods

- A postal questionnaire was sent to all households on both estates
- Three focus groups were undertaken with established residents' groups
- A session was undertaken with children at the local youth club
- An organised walk through the wood was held for residents, followed by a discussion
- Observations were made of people attending a community woodland day

Findings

For all three focus groups, discussions about personal safety and the dumping of rubbish in the woodland began without prompting, highlighting the importance of these issues to residents. However, people gave many other reasons why the woodland was important to themselves and their children. People described wildlife and contact with nature as particularly important in the city. The survey of residents found that 60% of respondents used the wood as a short cut to shops and buses, and 30% used the wood for walking and leisure. Thirty-three percent of respondents rated their appreciation of the wood as high, but 19% said their appreciation was low.

When asked where they played most often, the children in the youth club (aged 6–10) said that they chose the local park and Peabody Hill Wood. They also played in the street frequently and this was perceived as less dangerous than the park or wood. The majority of the twenty children in the club enjoyed playing outside more than inside.

Fifty-two people attended the woodland clearance day, with more children than adults. Activities included vegetation clearance, tree planting, music and face painting. The lack of participating adults was likely to be due, in part, to negative attitudes towards the wood.

Recommendations

The research outlines the importance of small areas of woodland in urban areas for local residents. We suggest that policy makers and managers may wish to consider the following:

- The research highlighted the importance of understanding people's relationships with woodlands in specific contexts. Therefore it is important for local residents to participate and voice their concerns. The Peabody Trust gained insights into how residents experienced the wood and showed willingness to take residents' concerns into consideration.
- The research outlined the importance of sustaining longer-term momentum once initial improvements were made in the wood and residents' views had been understood.
- Enabling and encouraging use by children and young people is a key issue. The children enjoyed being outdoors and talked about the dens they had constructed in the wood.
- All sections of the community need to be involved in decision-making about changes and improvements to the wood. Community involvement can increase feelings of safety through informal surveillance by local residents, bringing about wider benefits to the local community.

Partners

Forest Research, Forestry Commission, Peabody Trust, Trees for Cities.

Funding / Support

Heritage Lottery Funding
Forestry Commission

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Reports and publications

O'Brien, E. (2005). Trees and their impact on the emotional well-being of local residents on two inner London social housing estates. Report to Peabody Trust, Trees for Cities and the Forestry Commission. 52 pp. <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/website/forestresearch.nsf/ByUnique/INFD-6C8GNH>

O'Brien, E. (2006). Social housing and green space: a case study in Inner London. *Forestry*, 79, 535–549.