

South Yorkshire Coalfields

Engaging coalfield communities



The transformation of former coalfields into community woodlands has enabled the local people of South Yorkshire to experience the many benefits of a natural environment. Easily accessible multi-purpose paths allow for a wide range of leisure pursuits, and an innovative programme of recreational and educational activities have been specially designed by local rangers to encourage young and old alike to use their green space in a variety of ways. What were once spoil heaps now offer neighbouring communities areas for work, rest, play and the opportunity to interact with an environment that they might otherwise never have enjoyed.

objectives

- To encourage community engagement in former coalfield areas and a sense of ownership of the newly regenerated coalfield sites.
- To provide a recreational resource, and physical and mental health and well-being benefits to local people.
- To provide educational opportunities for schools and other learning groups.
- To increase partnership working in the area and encourage social enterprise.

actions

- Three Community Rangers and one Project Co-ordinator have been employed to work with volunteers from coalfield communities.
- Informal and formal consultations have taken place between Rangers and the local communities to ensure priority needs are met. As a result, a wide-ranging programme of opportunities is being established, including community art projects to visually enhance entrances, recreational and health-based activities and the development of site facilities.
- Awareness-raising events have been organised to reassure the public about the regenerated sites and encourage local people to get involved.
- A Green Gym project was developed in partnership with Doncaster Primary Care Trust and BTCV to provide health benefits to local people as well as to enhance the visual and biodiversity qualities of the site.

achievements

- Green Gym: two groups meet weekly, with an open session that involves Doncaster Millennium Volunteers and Cherry Grange Rehabilitation Centre.
- Goldthorpe Salvation Army Youth Group participate in orienteering, outdoor sports and educational activities at Thurnscoe Community Woodland, in return for litter picking.
- The art project Woodland Wishes works with schools from Dinnington, with children writing a wish e.g. 'I wish there were more places for birds to nest'. The wishes are planted on-site and they get involved in making the wishes come true. Schools, user groups and local artists have also worked together to design and create sculptures based on local history and wildlife.
- Artwork designed by primary schools and painted by local youth groups has been used to produce murals to decorate a climbing wall, create an 'art gallery' in the forest, and revitalise two underpasses on the sites.

achievements

continued...

- Community Rangers actively encourage local people to use the woodlands for self-led events e.g. sponsored walks and the 'big sit in' to record bird species.
- Children learn about growing plants in the Sunflower Garden.
- The Rangers also provide activities during the school holidays – such as Easter Eggstravaganzas, shelter building, minibeast hunts and music events.
- Community Rangers arrange sessions for students known for anti-social behaviour on practical conservation, teambuilding and survival skills to increase understanding of the woodland environment. Groups of 12 year olds, suspended from school up to 13 times for physical and verbal abuse, attend weekly sessions on condition that they are well-behaved at school all week.
- Long-distance and 'teatime walks' and 'Walking to Health' events are offered in a physical activity programme for people of all ages and fitness levels.
- Rangers provide information, dog food and questionnaires for dog walkers at Dog Pit Stops to get feedback on the site from regular users.

background

The 1980s saw the closure of many coalmines. The £56 million South Yorkshire Coalfield Restoration project, led by English Partnerships and Yorkshire Forward and managed by the Forestry Commission, was responsible for the restoration of over 400 ha of brownfield land. Former spoil heaps have been transformed into a mix of woodland, grassland, wetland for wading birds, water margins, open water and reed beds. Local people now have access to an additional 460 ha of Community woodlands, planted with deciduous and coniferous trees; Brodsworth, Bentley, Dinnington, Kiveton, Cudworth Common and Thurnscoe Community Woodlands are owned by the Land Restoration Trust, with the Forestry Commission responsible for on-site management. The initial partnership has grown to include diverse groups ranging from Primary Care Trusts to local Development Organisations. Four more sites will come on line this year.

quotes

"This should be on the NHS!" A gentlemen participant on a Teatime Walk.

"The group take great pride in being able to look after their own woodland."

Salvation Army.

"An amazingly cheap and effective way of talking to those who regularly use and rely on our sites. Now there is no such thing as a quick walk around the site." Louise Newell, Community Ranger.

partners

Yorkshire Forward
Renaissance South Yorkshire
English Partnerships
Forestry Commission
Land Restoration Trust
Local Authorities –
Doncaster, Rotherham and Barnsley
Groundwork Dearne Valley

funding

Yorkshire Forward
English Partnerships
Forestry Commission
Land Restoration Trust
South Yorkshire Forest
Partnership

lessons learnt

- To never get disheartened when projects/events do not go as you had intended.
- There is always a new community group/individual who brings new enthusiasm and energy to the project, normally when you least expect it!
- To not let the minority who tries to damage the site discourage you from trying again and again for the rest of the community.
- To provide long-term support to local communities and ensure sites are sustainable and maximised to their full potential.