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# Finalist's case study

## Univ. of the West of England Community Bristol Parkhive



### About the project

#### Summary

Bristol Parkhive is an innovative, collaborative and unique project developed by UWE in partnership with Bristol Parks Forum, the city's umbrella network for parks and green spaces volunteers in the city. The project has developed and delivered an extensive programme of activities, including co-creating an app to help residents (and visitors) find the city's parks and green spaces, delivering digital skills workshops for the city's parks and green spaces volunteers, and creating a new digital photographic archive (to date containing more than 5,000 crowd sourced images) celebrating the city's parks and green spaces. The project has – to date – actively engaged more than 4,000 of the city's residents and continues to develop - catalysing transformative opportunities for local residents employment, enterprise and education while supporting sustainable, and ethical management of the green space for our local communities into the future.

#### Profile

- University project
- 60 student volunteers
- 7 staff
- University-Community co-created collaboration

#### Project partners

Bristol Parks Forum; Bristol City Council; Bristol 2015; Bristol Natural History Consortium (Festival of Nature); Calvium; Love Parks/Keep Britain Tidy; Historic England (Heritage Schools); Steve England; Royal Horticultural Society; Architecture Centre; Bristol Neighbourhood Partnerships; Avon Wildlife Trust; River Malago Schools; Horfield Common Primary School; Various parks 'Friends of' groups: Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, Victoria Park Action Group, Sneyd Park, Troopers Hill, Horfield Common, Lawrence Weston Community Farm, Friends of the Avon New Cut; Big Park Draw

### The results

#### The problem

UK Parks, including those in Bristol, are 'in crisis,' (HLF, State of UK Parks 2012). For most residents (specifically those in low cultural participation groups) local parks are the most visible, and tangible sites of first contact with, and engagement with issues connected to the role and importance of nature in the city, and a gateway into engagement with sustainable practices which will contribute to global sustainability goals (Chiesura: 2004). Despite this, UK public parks do not attract statutory funding, so are vulnerable to the cuts currently being implemented by local authorities, including those in Bristol. UK-wide, public parks and green spaces are in decline; there is a recognised 'spiral of decline' which leads to public spaces being used less and less & then inevitably closed to the public, sold off on the basis that they are 'little used,' (Area Green Space Plan, Bristol City Council: 2010) , and built on; meaning that fewer residents can benefit from the well-documented health (physical, mental), wellbeing, environmental, nature, community and other positive impacts of green spaces, and that their role in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change in cities (for example in supporting flood resilience) is further diminished. The loss of public parks has the potential to directly negatively



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impact on the wellbeing of more than 80% of the city's residents. Parks are the most used leisure resources in Bristol (Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, Bristol City Council, 2007/Rethinking Parks, NESTA: 2012).

## The approach

Our project sought to impact on this, and to work with communities in the city to explore how UWE as an anchor institution in the city could help to support improved outcomes for the city's parks and green spaces, through engaging with, and activating our skills and resources to support communities working across the city. Working in partnership with Bristol Parks Forum (BPF), the city's umbrella organisation for volunteer-led parks groups enabled us to work collaboratively, and for our work to impact positively in every neighbourhood. The rationale for working with BPF was informed by HLF's State of the UK Parks report which described the situation UK public parks (including those in Bristol) are in: "Parks are under direct threat. 86% of parks managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010, a trend they expect to continue over the next three years. This could mean: park facilities such as cafes and toilets are closed or opening hours reduced; grass left uncut, flower beds left empty, play areas less regularly cleaned and inspected and more anti-social behaviour due to less park staff. 45% of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management to others. This could mean: loss of some parks, parts of parks and other green spaces, management of parks being divided between different organisations, community groups being asked to take on larger parks and needing support to do so effectively." As an anchor institution in the city committed to sustainability and our civic role, we wanted to help. With the experience we have of developing and managing successful collaborations, and specific skills and expertise that we have in audience development, digital media, policy and socially-engaged arts practices, we were confident that we could.

## Our goals

The Parkhive project is a model of best-practice for HE/City/Community collaboration, and our goal has been to develop respectful relationships that flatten hierarchies across complex and unique multi-stakeholder partnerships. This approach has enabled the team to work across (often challenging) unitary authority, sector and subject boundaries, in order to support sustainable innovation and social purpose outcomes for the benefit of our local communities. From biodiversity and enterprise, to filmmaking and wellbeing, Parkhive aimed at facilitating the sharing of diverse knowledge and skills, and enabling the building of relationships and the creation of opportunities. This has initiated positive change and created benefits for all the city's communities.

## Obstacles and solutions

Communicating the importance of sustainability education in curriculum for subject areas where staff might not see this as a priority	Leading by example by using innovative ways to do this
Interfacing with voluntary groups whose organizational structures often mean it is challenging for them to engage with Higher Education	Coordinating a wide range of external partnerships and relationships to ensure consistent, external engagement and ensuring this activity can work with/for internal timescales (e.g. live project modules); Recognizing the need to be flexible to reach participation groups and networks
University silos and HE structuring issues where subject areas, departments and faculties remain	Facilitating cross-faculty and interdisciplinary projects, crossing boundary areas with teaching and



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isolated from each other	learning, research and community engagement benefits
Engaging students in subject areas not traditionally associated with sustainability education	Making sustainability and social benefit projects relevant, important, and ongoing for students in various disciplines; Engaging students personally with their interests and co-creating projects with external partners that match student interests and professional goals with community group needs

## Performance and results

Bristol Parkhive has:

- co-created a unique free app to help residents and visitors find the city's parks and what facilities they have- e.g. children's play areas - and to bring visitors into areas of the city beyond the usual tourist spots.
- created a growing crowdsourced digital photographic archive celebrating the city's parks, containing 5,459 images.
- developed the capacity/ability of park volunteer groups to secure additional funding for park improvements through workshops and the production of a fundraising 'toolkit', resulting in £54k income and 20+ volunteers trained.
- provided summaries of new academic research to support external funding applications.
- built a new website as a one-stop portal, providing free learning resources.

The project team has delivered a programme of 16 community media workshops supported by 8 students, who subsequently acted as mentors to 22 individual groups. Outputs included how to:

- build a website
- make a film
- create walking and running routes
- create wildlife trails for young people
- run sustainable events

## The future

### Lessons learned

The App: The Parkhive App will remain a great resource to help enable residents and visitors to Bristol to get out, explore, and enjoy the City's myriad parks and green spaces. We are proud to say that the Parkhive App received formal recognition from the European Commission-European Green Capital headquarters, and we believe it can serve as a model for other local authorities, both nationally and internationally, to follow in order to highlight and centralise information about their parks and green spaces.

The Digital Photographic Archive: Our publically crowd-sourced archive of over 5,000 photos provides evidence of the various uses of green spaces in the city, and demonstrates that the City's green areas are not in fact under or little used by the public. It is our hope that this can help provide a bulwark against future threats of parkland disposal and imbalanced development.

Student engagement: To date, we've had 57 separate students get in direct contact, to which 35 of them have officially engaged with working with us on projects. It was very important to us that we try to create project





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opportunities for students across all courses—from the social sciences and humanities, to the creative arts and natural sciences—and we aimed to foster a model of interdisciplinary and collaborative working across academic departments. We believe that the students who worked with us gained valuable experience applying their academic content to real-world situations, learned new skills, and increased their confidence and professionalism by interacting with external partners.

Model for outreach: We believe this project demonstrates that the University can in fact serve as an anchor institution, and that it has showed the benefits of working more collaboratively with the city of Bristol and community groups.

The Fair Funding for Parks Campaign: Through this we hope to develop the conversation and galvanise a campaign around the issue of statutory funding for parks in the months and years to come.

## **We have also learned about keys for successful outreach and project management:**

1. A team, rather than solo effort, is best to undertake a complex project, with each member having clearly defined, separate roles and responsibilities.
2. To have a 'project development' point of view, in order to spot and create new opportunities. The relevant members need to act as 'creative producers' or 'entrepreneurs', in order to generate new projects and relationships.
3. To have a 'collaboration mindset', with an eye and desire to work across faculties, departments and academic subject areas. One should think about what skills, knowledge, and strengths staff members and students of each faculty/course possess, and how they could best be utilised and built upon. This collaborative mindset also has a view that external organisations or groups can come together to share resources and skill sets.
4. Having clear objectives and tangible final outcomes for every project, thus being accountable for internal staff, students' and external partners' time and effort.
5. Setting and maintaining relatively short timescales, recognising that successfully working with external partners requires a fairly quick turnaround and response time in order to get projects off the ground. Higher Education timescales are generally too long and slow.
6. Monitoring and oversight of student placements and projects- first vetting students and then shepherding first contact with external partners to make sure it is a good fit for both. Checking in on project progress periodically, and keeping final outcome on track for completion.
7. Having a completely accessible, clear point of contact and centralised information source for internal staff/students and external organisations to engage with.

## **Sharing your project**

We've communicated about through many means: through social media through our Facebook and Twitter accounts; through media interviews on BBC Radio, articles in the Bristol Post, Spark, and Bristol 24/7, as well as directly with parks volunteers at the Bristol Parks Forum meetings and various community events; with our student volunteers; UWE staff and interested persons at our info booths at our UWE/Bristol University events;



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interested persons at our info booth and photo archive exhibition at the Festival of Nature in June; people who participated in our outreach activities-public workshops, schools and heritage events; people who downloaded our app; people who contributed to our digital photographic archive; people who attended our photo archive exhibitions at Art on the Hill in south Bristol and at the UWE Bower Ashton campus.

This has had a tremendous impact in spreading knowledge and information about the project and raising the profile and visibility of parks and greenspaces, as well as reinforcing the argument for their importance for human health and well-being, and the critical necessity of statutory funding to support maintenance, plant and wildlife conservation, and preservation.

## What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

It has been an honour to be chosen as a finalist and we are very proud to be one of the wonderful selection of projects from UWE.

### Further information

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