

CASE STUDY: Urban and Community Forestry

Warley Woods, Smethwick, West Midlands

Site owned and managed by: Warley Woods Community Trust, Smethwick, West Midlands
Gold Award: Excellence in Forestry 2017

The site

Warley Woods Community Trust manages and maintains a remarkably diverse 40 hectare park entirely surrounded by miles of dense urban environment in the centre of Smethwick, West Midlands.

In the 1800s it had been designed as a private pleasure garden for local industrialist Samuel Galton Junior by Humphry Repton.

Around one third of the park is woodland, mainly native species. It includes a small area of ancient woodland although the majority was planted in the 1800s.

The park was saved from becoming a housing development in the 1900s by public subscription, and saved again from neglect when Warley Woods Community Trust took over management from the local authority in 2004. In doing so they became the first urban park in the UK to be managed by a Community Trust.

In addition to the woods and parkland, Warley Woods Community Trust also took control of the nine-hole golf course and created a visitor centre, shop and franchised café employing eight staff.



The first urban park to be managed by a Community Trust



Improved paths give access to woods for people with buggies, in wheelchairs and on bikes

Management

When Warley Woods Community Trust took over there had been no woodland management for 30 years and no new tree planting.

In 2008 they commissioned a Woodland Management Plan (WMP) and its recommendations have guided the Trust ever since.

Biannual tree safety surveys are now carried out and the Trust has not shied away from felling trees or controlling grey squirrel numbers to meet WMP aims and objectives.

They have restored driveways and improved paths, making it possible for people with buggies, in wheelchairs or on bicycles to use the wood. A children's play area has been created and is well used.

Biodiversity is a key component of the WMP with a proportion of dead trees left in situ to encourage animal and insect populations.

Volunteers are involved in all aspects of the management and maintenance of the woods. This includes:

- woodland maintenance
- organising events
- planting trees
- fundraising
- updating notice boards
- delivering leaflets



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Challenges/Successes

When the Trust took over the challenges were daunting; it took on expensive commitments and open ended liabilities and no member of the Trust had ever managed a similar site!

The Trust therefore looked for outside advice to help understand their responsibilities and guide their management.

In 2008 they received the highest score ever for a site entering the Green Flag Award for the first time and have held the award ever since; Warley Woods was voted one of the UK's favourite parks in 2016 and Trust Manager Viv Cole won the inaugural national Green Flag Employee of the Year Award.

Engagement

The Trust has more than 940 members and many active facebook and twitter followers.

Each year between 250-400 people volunteer - most of whom live within a few miles of the park.

Adult and school groups have been involved in tree and woodland planting and in bluebell cultivation.

Popular activities include:

- fungi walks, bird identification, dawn chorus and tree and bat walks
- woodland trails, forest play areas and fairy doors
- drama performances in the park
- Warley Woof - a group for dog owners giving access to events and training
- Warley Woods Pacers - a running club that meets three times a week

There are also trail and information leaflets, a shop and cafe and a Community Room that is available for hire - as well as the golf course to enjoy!



Above: Warley Woods can be enjoyed by many
Below: The Trust does not shy away from controlling grey squirrel numbers or felling trees to manage the woods



What impressed the judges

There is a well prepared Woodland Management Plan and all the trees have regular inspections by a professional arborist.

The Trust is extremely well organised and has an impressive system of governance which gives every confidence of long term security and continuity. This is demonstrated by the range of funding sources they have already accessed including Forestry Commission and HLF as well as the innovative way in which the site is being managed and developed.

Maybe the most unusual source of income and promotion of the site has been securing the use of the visitor centre as the local polling station!

This is an exceptional, high achieving and extremely well run and managed urban woodland. It is the model which others should aspire to and emulate.

For further information visit:

www.warleywoods.org.uk