



# WE RETHOUGHT PARKS

DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS

Nesta...



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### ABOUT THE RETHINKING PARKS PROGRAMME

Rethinking Parks was a joint Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund England programme to find, support and test new approaches to raising income or reducing costs for public parks. Public parks face cuts of 60% and more from current local authority revenues over the next decade, and this programme trialled new methods and models to address this funding gap. Other resources from the Rethinking Parks programme, including descriptions of other models, the summary report and links to tools for the sector can be found at: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/rethinking-parks>

### ABOUT DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS

Darlington is a market town in Durham, North East England. The Darlington Rethinking Parks project was tested across three parks in Darlington: Denes Park, North Park and South Park. Groundwork North East, Darlington Cares and Darlington Borough Council were all joint partners in this project.



# DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS AT A GLANCE

## *Harnessing the energy of business volunteers to improve parks*

Darlington Rethinking Parks improves parks by providing volunteering opportunities to businesses keen to contribute to their community on a regular basis. The model has mobilised many new volunteers to contribute to the upkeep and maintenance of parks, while also boosting employee engagement for businesses taking part.

*I loved [the park volunteering activity] today, it's been more than I expected*

(Corporate volunteer)

## WHAT'S THE POTENTIAL IMPACT?

Material improvements to parks can be made. In Darlington, this included repairs to pathways and play areas, painting and other maintenance. Projections suggest that Darlington Borough Council could obtain a return on investment of £1.7 of improvements for every £1 spent on the programme. This ratio is dependent on the level of contributions obtained from businesses, and could be higher elsewhere.

## CORE CHARACTERISTICS



QUICK TO DELIVER



A MODEST BUT  
MEANINGFUL LONG  
TERM IMPACT



ENGAGEMENT WITH  
BUSINESSES



VOLUNTEERING

## WHERE MIGHT FUNDING TO DELIVER COME FROM?

- Participating businesses (who may contribute for corporate social responsibility, staff engagement or team building reasons).
- Local authorities (who benefit from parks improvements over and above what would normally be achieved, at lower cost than contracting this work out)

## WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR DELIVERY?

- Connections with business networks
- A supply of businesses in the area open to regular volunteering
- Good communication and marketing skills to bring businesses in
- Skilled volunteer coordinators who can deliver fun volunteering days to keep businesses coming back
- Tools for volunteers to use on site
- Support, permission and partnership with the local authority (inc. parks staff)
- Knowledge of which activities add most benefit for parks, volunteers and sponsoring businesses

## HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO START SEEING THE IMPACT?

6 months to one year to develop a full volunteering programme and start achieving benefits for parks.



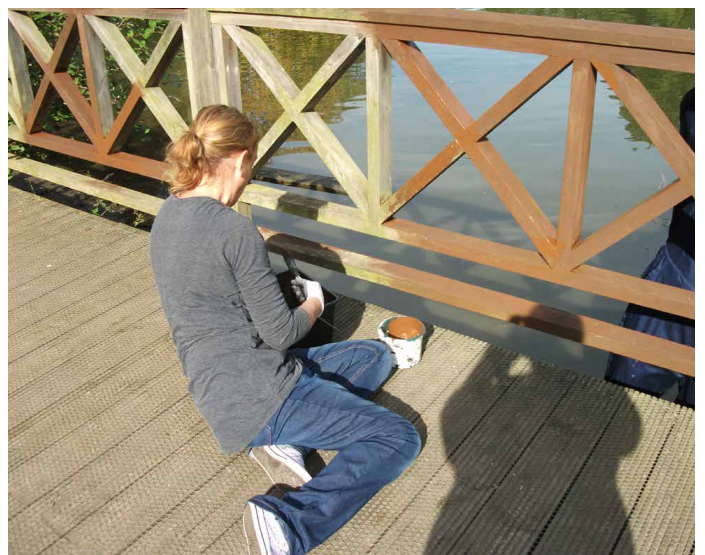
## DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS: WHAT THE TEAM DID

### WHAT WAS THE TEAM'S ORIGINAL IDEA?

The Darlington Rethinking Parks team comprised:

- Groundwork North East
- Darlington Borough Council
- Darlington Cares
- Individual businesses (provided volunteers)
- Friends of Parks Groups (supported the approach)

The team's original vision was to pair businesses with parks Friends groups, to provide training and advice and build the capacity of Friends groups. Businesses would support parks by helping improve Friends groups specialist skills (e.g. marketing) as well as through staff volunteer days in the park. Early in the programme, it became clear that the schedules of Friends' groups didn't coincide with corporate volunteering needs. The programme quickly became a schedule programme of direct volunteering by business employees in parks.





## WHAT DID THE TEAM DO?

1. Businesses were approached by the local corporate social responsibility membership organisation, Darlington Cares, to find out about their appetite for volunteering in parks.
2. Darlington Council identified a suitable list of activities for volunteers to undertake, initially on an ad hoc basis and then across the whole year. The Council's detailed understanding of parks priorities, and of what the public appreciate, meant they were well placed to identify activities that make for a worthwhile volunteering experience.
3. The Groundwork team visited staff lunch areas to raise awareness and sign individuals up. They found initial take up was slower than anticipated, because there was no internal marketing to staff. Having a physical presence meant people could get a better feel for the activities they could be involved in and be directly connected with opportunities. This was especially important where there was no internal lead to coordinate and sign up volunteers. Darlington Council communicated the opportunity of the programme to local communities, and raised the public's awareness.
4. Groundwork North East also benchmarked the current take up of volunteering by staff. For example, in one organisation with over 1,000 employees the team found that less than 5% of staff took up the opportunity to volunteer in the community, showing the scope to increase volunteering significantly.
5. Groundwork North East and Darlington Council ran the corporate volunteering activities in the parks. They provided training and motivation during the day and directly supervised the work activities. Volunteers were given the right tools and kit (provided by the council), regular breaks and good food.
6. Volunteers were encouraged to complete feedback forms so the process could be improved based on their experience. The value of improvements was measured (based on what they would otherwise cost to carry out), to demonstrate the benefit for Darlington Borough Council and participating businesses.





## ALIGNING AN OFFER THAT BUSINESSES WANT WITH WHAT PARKS NEED

Corporate volunteers have been working in the parks of Darlington for some time. But until recently just a handful of businesses were involved and volunteer input tended to be one-off and dispersed across a number of different sites. Darlington Rethinking Parks provided an opportunity to take corporate volunteering to a different level. The ambition was to involve more businesses in fewer sites so they could make a meaningful and sustained contribution to the maintenance and upkeep of the town's green spaces: "We had this ambition that we could get businesses to emotionally attach to a particular park and then commit them to regular take on park management responsibilities" describes Lisa Locke, Project Co-ordinator, Groundwork North East and Cumbria. To achieve their goal, the project partners knew that they would have to build relationships with businesses and make an offer that aligned what they want with what parks need. In practice, this meant three things: 1) making it easy for businesses to get involved; 2) addressing barriers faced by staff; and 3) targeting resources wisely.

### Making it easy for businesses to get involved

Although many larger businesses have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitments, managers don't always have time to get opportunities off the ground. To make it easy for businesses to get involved, the Darlington Rethinking Parks team provided lots of information about the different volunteering opportunities and, in some cases, they offered to facilitate and co-ordinate the whole process of enrolling volunteers. This meant going into organisations, talking directly with the staff, promoting opportunities and then signing them up. This is a resource intense process that requires sensitive facilitation and excellent communication skills. Helen Whitton has responsibility for CSR at EE and has been working closely with the Rethinking Parks team. She believes that it is their accommodating approach has been critical: "Communication is absolutely key. I do this as secondary to my job. I need everything to be as easy as possible. Rethinking Parks are very flexible and will go out of their way to try and meet the needs of EE."

### Addressing barriers faced by staff

The team discovered that there were practical barriers that were getting in the way of volunteering, as described by Lisa Locke:



*Our breakthrough moment came when we realised we needed to engage with staff at all levels of the business and listen to why they don't currently use their CSR opportunities.*



Lisa Locke

Sometimes employees didn't know how to book time off for volunteering, and sometimes they had concerns about the kinds of things they would be expected to do. Lisa explains what this meant for the approach to employees: "Listening to them allowed us to iron out any practical problems and then put together a programme that appealed to different people". This programme consisted of over 16 different activities, which included resurfacing a bike track, fence painting, bulb planting and building bird boxes.



## Targeting resources wisely

As well as putting time into the recruitment of volunteers, the team had to ensure that when volunteers got on site, they were safe and well-supported. All of this is very demanding on resources; targeting these resources wisely to ensure a ‘good return’ is therefore important. The team learnt that it helps to focus on a small number of sites and engage bigger businesses, as described by Rob George the Parks and Countryside Development Manager at Darlington Council: “Most businesses don’t have targets associated with corporate responsibility so there is no real impetus for them to commit to projects. It is easier to engage very large businesses because they have to report their CSR targets within their annual reports.” As well as working with large businesses, it helps to work with businesses across different sectors says Katie Blundell of Darlington Cares: “Sometimes business priorities can change quite quickly and this can be sector wide. Negative impacts are mitigated if you have a diverse range of businesses on board.”

Since Darlington Rethinking Parks was launched, strong relationships have been established with five businesses. The volunteer contribution to date has been calculated to be around £18,000. A lot has been learned about how to engage businesses and optimise the contribution of volunteers. At the same time there is recognition that the level of buy-in from businesses is not at the level that was originally anticipated. “The result is that the public purse is not as effected as we would hope it to be the case. Although very much appreciated, much of the work that is undertaken is fairly low value and even then needs quite a bit of resource to make sure it is delivered safely and effectively” states Rob George of Darlington Council.

The experience of Darlington Rethinking Parks shows that achieving a good fit between what businesses want and what the parks needs is challenging. Nevertheless Groundwork is keen to build on what they have learnt and roll out the programme to other parts of the town.

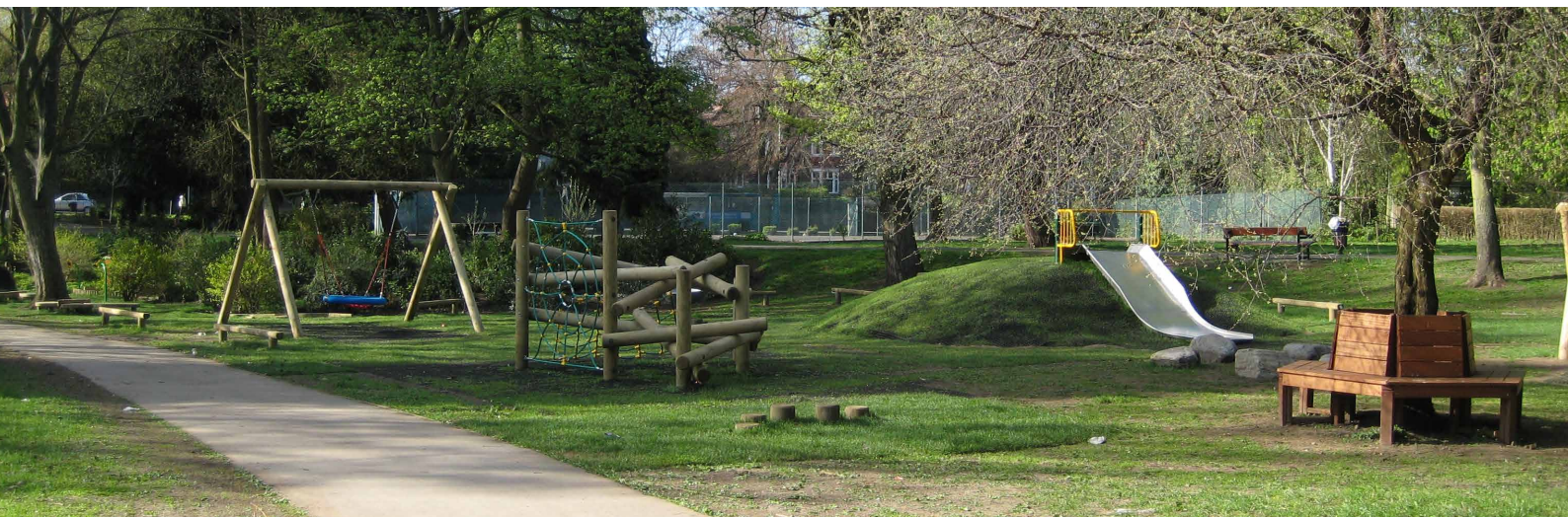
## WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT NEXT FOR THE TEAM?

The first year of the model was a success. Eight businesses signed up to Darlington Rethinking Parks, with staff from Cummins, EE and Darlington College volunteering regularly and others on a more ad hoc basis. 226 people have volunteered to date. The value of improvements to parks is in excess of £30,000. Examples of successful improvements include replacing a nature pathway and painting a pedestrian bridge.

Corporate volunteers really enjoyed the experience:

*This has helped me to improve my skills, and it has been great experience*

(Corporate volunteer participating in Darlington Rethinking Parks)



One part of the project that didn't progress as intended was linking Friends groups with businesses. This was both because the activities undertaken by business volunteers differed from the core remit of Friends' groups and because Friends' groups are typically active on weekends, whilst corporate volunteers want week time activities.

The Darlington Rethinking Parks scheme will continue. The team has adjusted their model to focus on activities that add maximum value to the parks. For example, volunteers who help rip up and replace a path provide a greater cost savings than painting a fence.

The team will also look at a higher level of cost recovery from businesses over time. The first year of operation was subsidised by the Rethinking Parks grant and the team are now exploring what investment will be needed from businesses over time to pay for a greater proportion of coordination and delivery costs. .

## FINANCIAL FORECAST: INDICATIVE PROJECTIONS FOR DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS TO 2020 (SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

YEAR	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>POGRAMME SIZE</b>					
No. activities to be delivered	12	18	18	20	22
No. businesses to participate	8	9	9	10	11
<b>INDICATIVE INCOME</b>					
Donations or Fees (e.g from Corporates)	0	9,000	9,000	10,000	11,000
Indicative Contribution from DBC	£ 8,840	£14,705	£13,705	£14,925	£15,886
<b>In kind contributions</b>					
Groundwork	£5,000	£0	£0	£0	£0
Darlington Cares	£5,000	£0	£0	£0	£0
Darlington Borough Council	£4,110	£4,110	£4,110	£4,110	£4,110
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b>£22,950</b>	<b>£ 27,815</b>	<b>£ 26,815</b>	<b>£ 28,405</b>	<b>£ 30,996</b>
<b>INDICATIVE EXPENSES</b>					
Activity Delivery	£ 6,917	£ 10,376	£ 10,376	£ 11,529	£ 12,682
Activity Planning	£ 2,905	£ 4,358	£ 4,358	£ 4,842	£ 5,327
Programme Planning	£ 7,627	£ 8,580	£ 8,580	£ 9,533	£ 10,487
subtotal, staff time	£ 17,450	£ 23,315	£ 23,315	£ 25,905	£ 28,496
Tools & Materials	£ 4,000	£ 3,000	£ 2,000	£ 2,000	£ 1,000
PPE	£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>£ 22,450</b>	<b>£ 27,315</b>	<b>£ 26,315</b>	<b>£ 27,905</b>	<b>£ 30,496</b>
<b>VALUE GENERATED FOR PARK</b>					
Estimated value of volunteers	£ 18,337	£ 27,506	£ 27,506	£ 30,562	£ 33,618
Indicative Residual value after DBC	£ 5,387.18	£ 8,690.90	£ 9,690.90	£ 12,156.56	£ 13,622.21



## WHAT DID THE TEAM LEARN AND WHAT ADVICE TO THEY GIVE TO OTHERS?

Understanding business demand and needs is critical for this model to be successful, as businesses are the source of volunteers and likely to be a core source of funding. Insights from the team are therefore focussed most on this element of the model.

Find out the trends in staffing periods for the year for each business before putting a calendar of events together. Consult with the businesses about when they have busy periods throughout the year, and when they have higher number of staff taking holidays.

Align delivery to the core needs of businesses. This may mean adapting the activities or approach slightly depending on each business's objectives.



*We are understanding the businesses better and their needs, what makes them want to volunteer, how many people volunteer a year, what are their main goals and what the business set up is in terms of encouraging employees to use their volunteer hours."*

Lisa Locke, Programme Coordinator, Groundwork NE & Cumbria.



Initially, the team assumed that once businesses had 'signed up' at a corporate level, this would lead directly to staff volunteering. However, Groundwork North East found that they also had to provide direct support to get staff to take part (e.g. speaking slots at all-staff meetings, regular visits and reminders).



*We realised that we needed to engage staff in businesses on all levels and listen to why they didn't currently use their CSR opportunities. This allowed us to understand what would encourage them to come out and support the programme. Listening to them allowed us to starting generating interest from businesses. We started to build up [sufficient] numbers for the activities to get results beneficial to both businesses and parks.*



## WHERE CAN I GO TO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

### NESTA DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS

<http://www.nesta.org.uk/darlington-rethinking-parks>

### GROUND WORK RETHINKING PARKS IN DARLINGTON

<http://www.groundwork.org.uk/Sites/northeast/pages/rethinking-parks-ne>

## QUICK GUIDE TO DELIVERY: DARLINGTON RETHINKING PARKS

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### Feasibility Assessment

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1. Research the demand from local businesses for volunteering activities in parks. Find out what they currently do in relation to Corporate Social Responsibility, team building days and skills development (and what they pay if possible). Tease out which of these benefits is best suited to your context. Identify opportunities to involve businesses, including any funding possibilities.
2. Work with parks managing agents (e.g. council parks team) to understand what tasks would be well suited to corporate volunteering. Find out what parks teams, staff, unions and Friends groups would need to work well with volunteers.
3. Plan your delivery model and costs in comparison to benefits for parks and businesses, as well as any potential income streams.

### Programme Development (if model is feasible)

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4. Develop a business proposition for the scheme, and associated marketing and branding to engage businesses.
5. Work with parks teams to identify and schedule tasks.
6. Recruit / allocate a volunteering coordinator.
7. Meet businesses to market the corporate volunteering offer, and secure investment / commitment. Approach CSR as well as Human Resource teams in larger organisations (depending on the focus of your model).
8. Design measurement systems to record and capture feedback based on the benefits businesses wish to achieve (e.g. team building, soft skills development) and impact for parks.
9. Purchase equipment and tools needed to deliver volunteering days.

### Implementation

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10. Circulate activity calendar and sign up corporate volunteers for participation. Attend staff meetings, run stalls and events and visit businesses regularly to signal the opportunity and get staff to sign up.
11. Deliver corporate volunteering days / activities in parks.
12. Measure value of contribution made to park maintenance and get feedback from volunteers. Use insights about what worked well and what could be improved to refine the programme.
13. Communicate insights and benefits back to businesses and local authority / parks managing agent at regular intervals.
14. Continue to promote and market the scheme to both new and existing businesses.
15. Hold networking / thank you / celebration events to recognise contribution of participating organisations and volunteers.
16. Review and refresh activities and approach regularly, based on feedback from stakeholders and operating cost vs benefit.





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January 2016

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