



Photo: Ant Clausen

How a woodland can change a neighbourhood

The story of Mab Lane Community Woodland



'Conventionally, neighbourhood parks or park-like open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on them.'

- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1960.

One of the most visible and striking consequences of Liverpool's year in the limelight as European Capital of Culture in 2008 was the planting of 20,000 trees to create 'the most colourful woodland in the UK'.

Mab Lane Community Woodland consists of two large fields on the edge of the West Derby area, known as 'the Mabby' and 'the Backfield'. Originally playing fields and landfill, they were plagued with problems of flooding, neglect and vandalism.

To help offset the carbon footprint of the Capital of Culture festivities, the city council joined forces with the Forestry Commission, Riverside Housing and The Mersey Forest, alongside local residents and schools and with funding from the former Northwest Development Agency, to plant a tree for everyone who attended the Capital of Culture launch.

The new woodland was officially opened in June 2010, after an investment of £688,000 in flood prevention and

drainage, landscaping, tree planting, improved security and community activities.

Three years on, is it possible to know whether this was money well spent?

Do people want to live here?

As Jane Jacobs observed half a century ago, a park or open space only works when it is used. And it is only used when people want to live nearby.

There are all sorts of reasons why people choose to live in or leave a neighbourhood, and they work together. A wide open space used for dumping cars and rubbish, and as an escape route for burglars, drags down the area. Abandoned houses, vandalism and antisocial behaviour turn open spaces from a pleasure into somewhere intimidating.

The Altfinch area, at the southern end of the Mabby, illustrates the issue.



Many Mab Lane residents believe that the area has improved following the creation of the community woodland. **Watch the video.**

Out of 48 homes in just one road, Altfinch Close, 20 were empty in January 2011. Some had been vacant for more than five years. Crime and antisocial behaviour were widespread, but few local residents thought reporting it would make any difference.

The main landlord, Riverside, was considering demolishing the 32 properties they own on the close, and selling the land at a cost of £800,000, or redeveloping the road itself – an option

that would have cost £4.9m. In nearby Penshaw Close, most of the tenants moved out of brand new houses because of the trouble associated with just one family. Properties were vandalised and lay empty for nearly two years.

It takes more than the improvement of an open space to turn such decline around, but it has been a key part of a coordinated effort to improve the area. Riverside brought neighbourhood

wardens in, created an office for a local residents' group, worked closely with the police to tackle antisocial behaviour, invested in youth work, and prioritised repairs and bringing empty properties back into use.

The creation of the community woodland helped Riverside decide the Altfinch area was worth investing in, and enabled it to consider less drastic and disruptive options than might otherwise have been necessary (see figure 1).

It also made empty homes easier to let, saving money on keeping them boarded up and bringing in nearly £20,000 of rental income over the course of a year. People were happier to stay and reported fewer problems. A survey of residents found satisfaction levels improved dramatically between January and December 2011, people felt a greater sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, and felt safer both in their homes and outside (see figure 2).

One result of this newfound confidence that can be directly traced to the improvement of the woodlands is the Growing Altfinch project, initiated by local residents, funded by Liverpool Primary Care Trust and supported by artists and the city's Everyman and Playhouse theatres. Residents have now created their own community garden, as Riverside's neighbourhood manager, Yvonne Makin, explains: 'We've gone from nobody wanting to

'I've been pleased at how little vandalism there has been. Often new developments like this or improvements within existing parks will become a target for attack, perhaps simply because they are new features within the established landscape, but that hasn't happened here which may be a result of the real local pride and sense of ownership there is for this site.'

Brendan Monks, green space development manager, Liverpool City Council



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live in Altfinch to having three tenants do a presentation to a participatory budget day. They were very clear they wanted a community garden, they wanted raised beds, and I think it was inspired from what's gone on in the woods. It's changed from a no-go area into an area where people want to live.'

Are people making connections?

A second test of the success of the community woodlands is whether it creates new opportunities and connections. Does the space bring people together or keep them apart?

'It's opening up facilities people have on this edge of Liverpool. It's life-changing because they just did not have it before.'

Barbara Murray, local councillor

The question is particularly relevant in the case of the Mab Lane woods because the Mabby and Backfield lie along the border between the city of Liverpool and neighbouring Knowsley. They also form a link from north to south along the course of the river Alt, connecting with Croxteth Country Park.

Immediately to the east of the Mabby is Stockbridge Village, a former council

estate that has undergone a multi-million pound regeneration programme. A new 'village centre' includes a sports hall, swimming pool, café, studios and a youth club. On the west of the Mabby is the popular Mab Lane Youth Centre.

People are now using the woodland as a convenient link between the two. Where once the tracks across the field were

waterlogged and overgrown, there are now well maintained paths suitable for prams, bikes or wheelchairs.

Tom Wright, manager at the youth centre, explains how the woodland is bringing communities together. Families from the Stockbridge Village side are now bringing children to activities at the youth centre when they wouldn't make the journey

'I'm really looking forward to next year. I just want those trees to be able to grow quicker!'

Claire Harding, teacher, Mab Lane Junior School



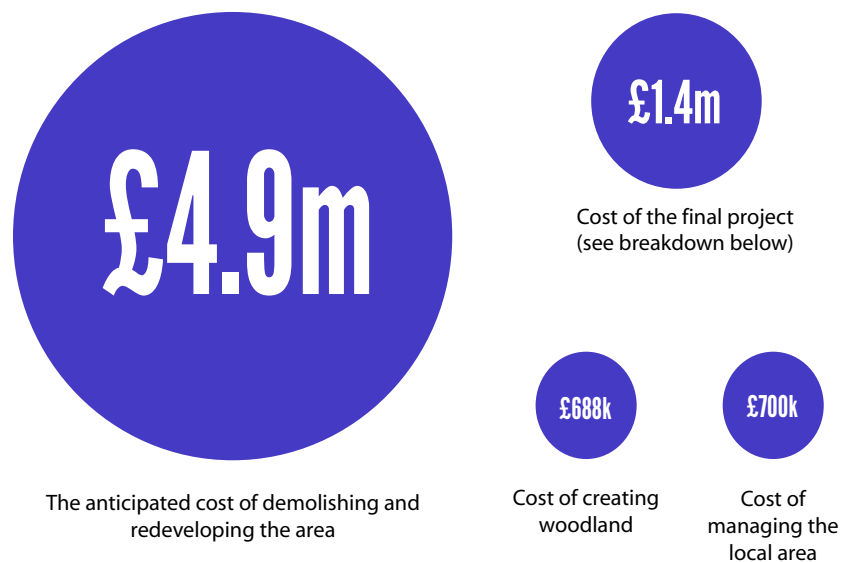


Figure 1: Creating a place where people want to stay - costs

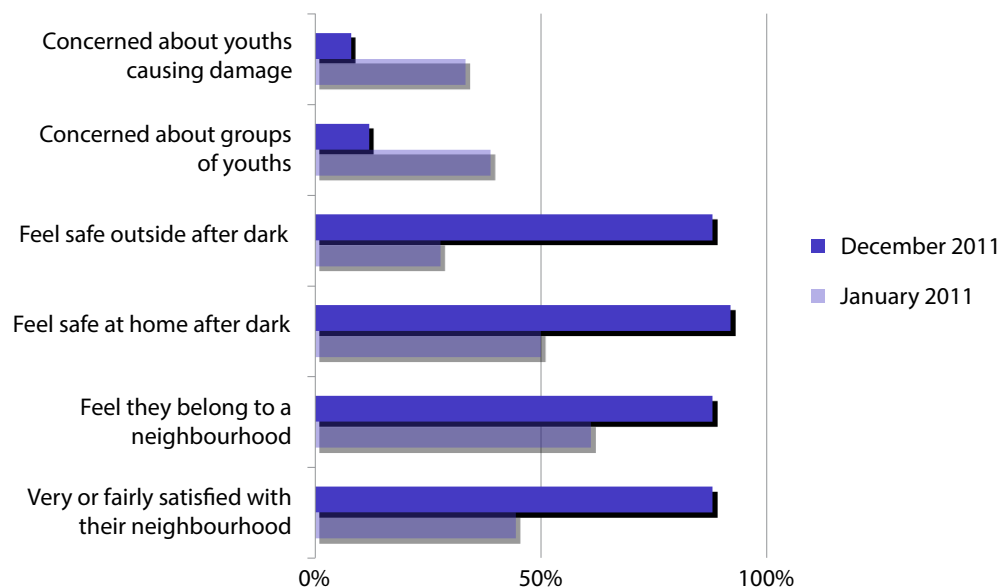


Figure 2: Improved satisfaction in the Altfinch area, January 2011 to December 2011

previously. 'We are seeing a lot of people now, maybe a dozen or 15 families, who now bring their children to the centre over the field,' he says.

The connections work both ways, with local residents crossing the Mabby to access the new facilities in Stockbridge Village. Shoppers use the woodlands as a short cut to the nearby Tesco, while for others it's a quiet and safe commuting route. This everyday activity makes the area feel safer – people go where they know other people will go.

Is this a good place for young people?

A place where young people enjoy growing up and where there's plenty for them to do is more likely to have a positive future. If young people are regarded as a nuisance, other people may be tempted to leave.

Riverside's survey shows that concerns about young people engaging in antisocial activities have diminished significantly over the last year. More importantly, youngsters are playing a positive part in the area's improvement.

Young people played a major role in the tree planting programme, and have been heavily involved in Growing Altfinch. Local schools are using the woodlands for a series of 'Forest School' classes, where pupils learn in a natural setting and improve their practical skills as well as their knowledge of the environment.

Two members of staff at Mab Lane Community School and St Albert's Primary School have been trained as Forest School leaders, and both have noticed a difference in children's attitudes and concentration when they have been working outside.

Teacher Claire Harding, who runs the Forest School sessions at Mab Lane Community School, says children with behavioural difficulties have been fully engaged in the activities and other teachers now want to train to lead similar classes. The enthusiasm has spread to parents and relatives too – the final day of the first course of Forest School activities brought a record turnout of parents and carers wanting to see what the kids were so excited about.

It's a similar story at St Albert's, where site manager Craig Young has seen children who were 'quiet and withdrawn' gaining

confidence and enthusiastically joining in. There was a similarly delighted reaction from parents to the final open day. 'Even the nans and granddads loved it,' Craig says. 'The granddads loved the den building.'

One spin-off from the Forest School classes has been the creation of an orchard in an unused playing field behind St Albert's. As the transformation of the Backfield next to St Albert's has continued, the school has added new activities of its own, entering the Royal Horticultural Society's school gardening awards and becoming 'school climate champions' for the borough of Knowsley.

Do people feel better?

A community woodland sounds a great idea. But there is no guarantee that it will be adopted by the community. For that to happen, it has to be a place that people want to visit and to use.

While the woodland was planned and planted there was a concerted effort to draw in local people, and to build on previous ideas and campaigns. Now that the planting is done, there are fewer formal events. But people have not stopped using the Mabby and the Backfield: the 'no-go' reputation has gone. Dog walkers, parents with prams, cyclists, fitness fanatics, picnickers, and children playing – all are spotted regularly, along with people who just use the woodlands

as a way to get from A to B. These ordinary uses don't in themselves show that the community is healthier, fitter, or more confident. But they do suggest a change is taking place. The apparently insignificant things can be the most telling. There's the childminder who's able to use the Mabby when the children she looks after want to run around outside. There's the youth centre which is now planning to plant an orchard. There's the local resident who saw one of the swales drying up, and decided to top it up with his garden hose.

As those small signs of change multiply, bigger changes can start to happen. People may become healthier and less stressed as they use the green space on their doorstep more. Children who are involved in gardening and food growing are less likely to be viewed as troublemakers. Houses that look out onto woodlands rather than dumped rubbish will be easier to let to new tenants.

Three years on, it is still too early for all these benefits to show up in official statistics. But the signs are promising. Where tenants would have previously jumped at the chance to move, they are now telling housing officers vociferously that they want to stay. That's what change looks like.

'I go through a couple of times a day and everyone I speak to is positive. Everyone speaks highly of it – it's a fantastic place. It's used by walkers, runners, cyclists, dog walkers, shoppers – whereas before it was just a barren place.'

Tony Beyga, local resident and photographer



Photo: Ant Clausen



Julian Dobson is a writer and commentator on regeneration, sustainable communities and social issues.

The Mersey Forest is the largest of England's 12 community forests. Find out more at www.merseyforest.org.uk

