

**Public Engagement with Research unit (PERu)**

## **PER Development Award 2014/15 – Summary Report Template**

**Shared Vision: community-student-staff research partnership for public engagement with underused open spaces**

**Project team:**

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**Project url:** <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/sustainabilityaction/research/shared-vision-project.page?>

**Quotes from participants:**

“This was a very interesting project to be involved with, to see how those from a University/Research background approached the questions/methodology, compared with those of us from a Community Development background. Valuable experience for us all I am sure, and the results will be very helpful when forming SO18 Big Local’s ‘next steps’ for our Environment strand of work.”

- Jo Proctor, SO18 Big Local Worker

“As well as providing a great opportunity to work with university students and staff on research, this project provided an opportune moment ahead of the city-wide regeneration to make good links with the SO18 Big Local group and, through them, local people.”

- Lindsay McCulloch, Southampton City Council

## Summary of the project

The Shared Vision project brought together the University's Centre for Environmental Sciences (CES), SO18 Big Local, Training for Work in Communities (TWICS) and Southampton City Council (SCC) to research local community use of three underused open spaces (Frogs Copse, Cutbush Hidden Pond and Harefield Woods) and to increase local appreciation and ownership of these spaces. A Shared Vision steering group with representatives from the partners and local residents was established; this ensured that as the project progressed it continued to meet the aims and expectation of a diverse range of partners.

A key focus of the project was to provide the evidence base for future work by SO18 Big Local by gaining better insight into local residents' views on the green spaces. This research built on previous collaborations between CES and the City Council on locally-focussed research projects, and in collaborative community engagement through the Southampton BioBlitz activities. Two MSc Environmental Sciences students took up the opportunity to undertake their research dissertations with the Shared Vision project, focusing on:

- Identifying local biodiversity and ecosystem services
- Identifying the views of local residents including barriers to current use and potential changes that would improve engagement

Local residents participated in surveys and focus groups. Traditionally the University has had limited interaction with the residents in SO18; this project gave them the opportunity to not only interact with student and staff researchers, but to be directly involved in research that will have a tangible outcome for their local area.

This research was coupled with dissemination of the research project and engagement activities on the green spaces, including publicising it through newsletters and community days. The project organised two Nature Hunts on two of the green spaces (Frogs Copse and Harefield Woods), including a family nature trail with prizes and craft activities. These provided a reason for local residents to visit the green spaces with the aim of raising the profile of the spaces. By creating a specially-designed trail, the hunts encouraged residents to explore the previously-unfamiliar green spaces within the comfort of an organised event. The hunts brought 40 people in June and 79 people in October onto the green spaces, which greatly exceeds typical weekend use of the green spaces. The Nature Hunts engaged the local residents not just with the green spaces but also with the biodiversity present on the green spaces in two different seasons. The hunts provide a model for future events, which will continue to encourage residents to use the green spaces and better understand the local plant and wildlife.

Throughout the project, the differences between the two communities (Townhill Park and Harefield) were teased out. The research projects treated the two projects as distinct, which was reflected in the focus groups and the analysis of the survey results. The engagement activities also helped to identify the differences. For example, at the nature hunts at Townhill whole families attended the events, with many of them coming to both the June and October hunts; the current level of community engagement in Harefield is much lower. The Shared Vision project will write a specific action plan for each community, reflecting the research results and the differing starting points for future public engagement.

The project has benefited all the partners:

- The community: This project has helped SO18 Big Local make a lasting positive difference in the communities by helping understand current barriers to use of the spaces, and how to overcome them. The involvement of the University and SCC in the Shared Vision project provided an element of external endorsement in the green spaces in the eyes of local residents.
- The City Council: Greater use of the green spaces will make them a point of stability during the redevelopment taking place in Townhill Park and Harefield. The biodiversity data will contribute to the City Council's database.
- The students: improved their research and team-working skills, as well as enjoying being able to have a positive impact in the Southampton community during the studies.
- The University: Its reputation and connections with the community groups and local residents has improved. This partnership approach to research will be shared with the wider university community as a model for future work.

#### **Progress against the project aims and objectives:**

##### ***To contribute to and disseminate existing research into ecosystem services provided by local green spaces, building on the body of existing collaborative research between CES and SCC.***

Shared Vision has contributed to existing research through the research undertaken by the MSc students with input from the local residents, community groups and SCC. This ensured that the research remained academically robust whilst also supporting the practical aims of the project to better engage people with the green spaces. The students benefited from working with different stakeholders and seeing the legacy of their research have a positive impact in the community beyond their tenure at the university.

The research was disseminated to the local community through newsletters, community days and the nature hunts. The final dissertations were completed at the end of September so further dissemination with the final results will now be progressed through: non-technical reports for the community groups; presenting the results to the SO18 Big Local Partnership Committee; posters tailored to the two areas (Townhill Park and Harefield) in local community buildings; online promotion.

The research is not just being disseminated to local residents; it will have tangible outcomes for their local areas. The Shared Vision project team will use the research to inform an action plan for SO18 Big Local for future engagement initiatives. In Townhill Park, this will be used to support the area and residents through a period of change in the city's regeneration programme.

The research experience is also being disseminated to the university community as a case study and learning tool for university-community research partnerships. The project had a stand at the Public Engagement with Research conference in May 2015. It is intended to produce a number of Sustainability Action blog posts and seminars about the project, focusing in particular on the experience of community groups and the City Council of conducting research with the University, exploring the opportunities and potential challenges to overcome.

***To recognise and respond to public views by supporting the SO18 Big Local through researching local biodiversity in three extremely underused open spaces, and research the collective needs and aspirations of local people for the future use of these open spaces***

The MSc projects undertaken by two CES students researched the local biodiversity and the views of local people for the green spaces. An initial survey of public views at a May Community Day identified that people were not aware of the green spaces. This informed the development of the Nature Hunts as a way to encourage people to not only visit the green spaces but also explore them further. The development of an action plan for SO18 Big Local going forward is the mechanism for responding to public views of the green spaces and how they can be better used going forwards.

***To inspire young people through engaging and empowering university students to support community research into local biodiversity and community needs. We will also work with local schools and scout groups to re-engage young people with nature through taking part in citizen science.***

The MSc dissertations provided a formal mechanism for university students to undertake community research. This project demonstrates that by working in partnership with community groups it is possible to maintain research integrity whilst also having useful practical outcomes. Following the submission of the MSc dissertations, further promotion of this partnership project is intended. By publicising the impact of such community research, this may empower and encourage other university students to undertake research that benefits them academically and has a positive impact on the local community.

The Nature Hunts were targeted at young people with the aim of helping them to identify local species and have a positive experience of nature on the green spaces. Promotion for the Nature Hunt was targeted at the local schools, scout groups and residential properties near to the green spaces. The action plan for future work will include a particular focus on engaging young people and working with local schools.

### **Evaluation of success**

The success of the project against the originally stated mechanisms for evaluating success:

- ***Dissemination of the research into local ecosystem services via production of a dissertation, a peer-reviewed publication and presentation to local communities.***
  - Two student dissertations were produced through the Shared Vision project
  - The results will be presented to the SO18 Big Local Partnership Committee on the 15<sup>th</sup> October. They will also be used to create two posters, one for each of the two areas presenting the results specific to that area. These posters will be put up in the local community centres/hubs so that local residents visiting them can read about the research.
  - In Townhill Park, the results will inform discussions and responses to the City Council's planned regeneration of the area.
- ***Biodiversity surveys (BioBlitz) of the three spaces by local people with support of students, staff and SCC.***
  - The goal of the biodiversity surveys had been twofold: to provide data on the local biodiversity and to engage local people with the green spaces. The project team recognised that the existing level of public engagement with the green spaces meant that biodiversity surveys were too ambitious to achieve within the timescale of the project. It was agreed that the Nature Hunts provided a more effective 'light touch' alternative by encouraging local people to engage with the local biodiversity on the green spaces. To

provide data on the local biodiversity, a survey was undertaken as part of one of the dissertations.

- **Identified the vision, aspirations of local people for the open spaces, and existing barriers to current use.**
  - The MSc students' research was used to identify the views of local residents on the green spaces, through surveys and focus groups. By organising the focus groups with SO18 Big Local and TWICS, these community groups were able to engage with the participating local residents who expressed aspirations and vision for the green spaces and a desire to be involved further.
- **Co-created with the local community an action plan for SO18 Big Local Partnership to implement to achieve greater use of the open spaces, making best use of its resources to achieve their priorities.**
  - The research by the MSc students provides the evidence base for creating a robust and effective action plan for SO18 Big Local. With the MSc deadline being the end of September, the action plan is being created at present.
- **Design for public engagement materials for the green spaces.**
  - The project team recognised that this was potentially too ambitious given current levels of engagement with the green spaces. The research conducted through this project is intended to help SO18 Big Local make best use of its resource to engage people with the green spaces. The team recognised that it needed further evidence as to whether engagement materials would have the desired impact of improving public use of the green spaces. The research conducted through this project will provide the evidence to consider whether the design for public engagement materials will be incorporated into the action plan going forward.

Assessment of the Shared Vision project's contribution to the original criteria for the PER call:

- **Stimulating interest, excitement and debate about research area**

Traditionally the residents in the SO18 area have not had strong links with the University. This project provided an opportunity for them to be involved in research area that directly affects them through the student-led surveys and focus groups. The engagement activities and delivery of the research-informed action plan demonstrate how local residents can benefit from research.
- **Helping to embed a culture of public engagement with research at UoS**

Through the Public Engagement with Research Conference, the project partners were able to discuss the project with the wider UoS research community. With the research now completed, the project team is working to disseminate the project further to the wider university community through blog posts and seminars. These will focus in particular on the experience of community groups and the City Council of engaging with UoS research, and the benefits of public engagement with research – for the community and for the university.
- **Opportunity for collaboration/partnership working (internal & external)**

Collaboration is at the heart of the project. This project built upon various existing partnerships (student-staff through Sustainability Action; CES and SCC for research) to bring together diverse stakeholders with complementary aims and objectives that could benefit from partnership working. Collaboration was critical to the success of the project objectives

to engage the public with research that produces tangible benefits for the community, the researchers and the organisations involved.

- ***Potential for sustainability***

SO18 Big Local is a ten-year project working with the Harefield, Midanbury and Townhill Park communities. The Shared Vision project was designed to undertake the necessary research within the year to provide the evidence-base for an effective action plan for further work, enabling SO18 Big Local to prioritise for its future resource use. The PER funding enabled the project team to trial engagement activities; the success of these provided the learning for future engagement activities for further engagement of local residents with the open spaces.

**Reflection on any difficulties or challenges you encountered along the way and how you tackled these – eg. lessons learned, top tips, what you might have done differently ...**

A challenge for a project with such diverse stakeholders is producing a workable calendar for activity that suits the different stakeholders. For conducting the research and engaging the public with it, the team needed to identify times that suited the calendar of the students, the local communities (in particular school-aged children) and the prevalence of biodiversity and wildlife. The team worked together to identify the best windows for activity but these were sometimes limited, for example the June nature hunts took place after the majority of students had left Southampton for the summer. The challenge of differing calendars meant that some activities could not be completed within this year; for example the engagement activities were taking place in the summer which did not suit working with the scout groups. Given the challenge of balancing different timetables, the project team identified what was achievable and strove to deliver that well rather than attempt too many activities at times which would have been less effective. The dissemination of the project to the wider university community was also delayed to allow the MSc students to complete their research (at the end of September).

The initial application outlined ambitious engagement activities including having local residents design engagement materials. After a period of discussion, the project team recognised that these activities would be unsuccessful at this time due to the existing low level of engagement with the green spaces. The Nature Hunts proved to be effective initial activities to begin raising the profile of the green spaces, whilst the proposed activities will be considered for the action plan in light of the MSc research undertaken during the project.

With such diverse partners involved in the project it was critical to outline the different expectations and goals from the beginning of the project. There was potential for the goals to be in conflict, for example the students sought to conduct a focus group with a representative sample of the local residents but for SO18 Big Local the time would be better spent engaging with individuals were interested in working with them in the future. To address such challenges the team needed to be honest about their goals and expectations and agree where these dovetailed and where separate events/activities needed to be undertaken to achieve them.

**Next steps – will the project continue/be developed/lead to something else/bring new opportunities?**

The Shared Vision project was born out of a recognition by SO18 Big Local that it needed to better understand the local green spaces and their use in order to take further action, and that by working with the University and SCC this could be achieved. The project team are working on action plans tailored to each of the two areas for SO18 Big Local activity going forwards, which will be informed by the students' research and the learning from this project. Through these action plans, work will continue on this project's aims to disseminate university research on the green spaces, respond to public views on the green spaces and inspire young people to engage with research and local biodiversity and the green spaces. The timing of this project was opportune for SCC as it launches its ten-year city regeneration work. SCC has identified green spaces as a potential site of constancy during a period of transition and uncertainty for communities due to the regeneration. By joining Shared Vision, SCC were able to identify and work with interested members of the local community who might be involved maintenance of the green spaces.

The University's Sustainability Action Programme will continue to support the work of SO18 Big Local through promoting to students any volunteer opportunities in the community such as the Nature Hunts and other engagement activities. Prior to this project, the Sustainability Action Programme had a successful history of student-staff partnerships but limited activity in the community. This project has provided the learning that will shape future community-student-staff partnerships; learning that will be shared with the wider University research community.

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