

Something for everyone: Stafford Orchard, Quorn



Cathy Harris

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Summary

Background

Stafford Orchard is a relatively small park located in the village of Quorn, Leicestershire, which is home to just over 5,000 residents. A team of volunteers, who were mostly members of Quorn Parish Council, received funding from The National Lottery Community Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund for the restoration and development of Stafford Orchard in the first round of funding for the Parks for People programme.

The project

The main elements of the project were:

- Improving entrances, creating new paths, widening and resurfacing and adding lighting on existing paths to improve accessibility and safety.
- Creation of a raised performance area, with access to electricity for concerts and outdoor events.
- Planting of trees and other plants and flowers, including the creation of a sensory garden and filling in gaps in the avenue of lime trees.
- Replacing the younger children's play equipment.
- Adding play equipment for older children.
- Installing a multi-use games area (MUGA), skate park and gym/exercise equipment.
- Heritage boards providing information on the history and heritage of the park and buildings.
- Picnic tables and seating throughout the park.
- Levelling and reseeded the area used for football.
- Employing a groundsman to maintain the park.

Evaluation methods

The project evaluation took place between January and June 2020. Methods consisted of interviews and a focus group with the project team, interviews with other stakeholders and park users, a survey of local residents, and analysis of secondary data provided by the project team and the funders.

Impact

The improvements made to the park as a result of the Parks for People funding have created a number of benefits for the local community:

- **Increasing levels of physical activity:** This has been achieved through the creation of an accessible perimeter path, installation of play and exercise equipment for people of all ages, and improvement and maintenance of open space for exercise.
- **Improving mental health and wellbeing:** The restoration has helped in combating loneliness by creating a safe, accessible and pleasant space for socialising.

- **Bringing people together:** Significant improvements to the facilities available have made Stafford Orchard a community hub where people come together informally and for a range of activities and events.
- **Engaging with nature and the environment:** Significant investment in planting and improving habitats has created a number of areas within the park where users can experience and enjoy the natural environment, wildlife and ecology.
- **Heritage:** The considerable historical heritage of the park is now highlighted and preserved with named entrances, information boards, and a memorial to the 82nd Airborne.
- **Reducing inequalities:** Improvements to entrances and paths, has made the park more accessible, for example, for older people, people with disabilities and families with young children.
- **Supporting the local economy:** The park has become a focal point in the village and the location of the community café provides mutual benefits. Large scale events bring in visitors from outside the village which support local businesses.

The passion and commitment of the project team was clearly a huge factor in the success of this project, and their involvement of the local community throughout the process enabled them to achieve a park which has '*something for everyone*' and is described as the '*heart of the village*'.

Learning points

1. The scale of a project like this can be challenging for a group of volunteers.
2. Strong relationships and teamwork are essential for the success of the project.
3. Meaningful consultation with the local community can be key to the success of a project like this.
4. The timing of applications for funding can have a significant impact and consideration should be given to opportunities for further development and future funding.
5. A long-term management plan is important to safeguard the future of parks in receipt of funding.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Parks for People was a programme by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund to revitalise historic parks and cemeteries. Since 2006 the programme has contributed £254 million to 135 projects across the UK. It is the successor programme to two other funding schemes, the Urban Parks Programme and the Public Parks Initiative. Since 1996, over £900m of National Lottery funding has been awarded to more than 900 UK public parks for capital works and public engagement activities.

This case study is part of a national evaluation of the Parks for People programme. The evaluation is being undertaken by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, along with colleagues at the University of Sheffield and Urban Pollinators Ltd. As part of the evaluation, the research team first conducted a review of the academic evidence on the social benefits of parks and urban green spaces. This document, *Space to Thrive*, was published by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund in January 2020. Following this research, the evaluators examined six Parks for People projects, conducted at different times in different locations, to consider the impact of the funding and the lessons for local and national policy. These are:

- Alexandra Park, Manchester.
- Boutham Park, Lincoln.
- Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, Tunbridge Wells.
- Myatt's Field, Brixton.
- Saughton Park, Edinburgh.
- Stafford Orchard, Quorn, Leicestershire.

This report starts by introducing Stafford Orchard and the work done there. It then looks at the impact of the Parks for People project, framing the discussion by referring to the six types of benefit identified in the *Space to Thrive* report. It then draws on additional research to consider how these benefits were affected by the restrictions on public parks and urban spaces imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Finally, it considers some opportunities and challenges for the future, learning points from the project, and the overall difference it has made. For detail on research methods, please refer to Appendix 1.

1.2. The park and the local area

Stafford Orchard is located in the village of Quorn, Leicestershire, which is home to just over 5,000 residents. The park is relatively small in area, but offers a wide range of facilities and features, including:

- A level grassed area that can accommodate football and other sports.
- Play areas for younger and older children.
- A skate park.
- A MUGA.

- Outdoor gym equipment.
- A sensory garden.
- A raised performance area with electrical power.
- A perimeter walking or jogging path.
- Toilet facilities at the Station Road entrance.
- A brook running along the south-eastern boundary with areas for play or relaxing.
- A selection of artwork.
- A memorial to the 82nd Airborne (including an avenue of lime trees).
- Heritage boards describing the history of the park.

A community café and library are directly adjacent to the park on the north east side and the park is very close to the heart of the village which offers a number of amenities, including shops, pubs, restaurants, takeaways, and a post office. The community café and library were developed after the restoration of Stafford Orchard, however this work was not funded by the Parks for People project as the parish council did not own the land or buildings at the time of submitting the bid. A car park managed by Charnwood Borough Council is located at the south west entrance to the park.

1.3. About the restoration project

A group of volunteers, who were mostly members of Quorn Parish Council were awarded £645,500 from The National Lottery Community Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund for the restoration and development of Stafford Orchard in the first round of funding for the Parks for People programme. Additional funding from Charnwood Borough Council, Quorn Parish Council, Section 106 funds from housing developments in the village and other smaller grants meant that a total of over £800,000 was available for the restoration of the park and associated buildings.

The main elements of the project were:

- Improving entrances, creating new paths, widening and resurfacing and adding lighting on existing paths to improve accessibility and safety.
- Creation of a raised performance area, with access to electricity for concerts and outdoor events.
- Planting of trees and other plants and flowers, including the creation of a sensory garden and filling in gaps in the avenue of lime trees.
- Replacing the younger children's play equipment.
- Adding play equipment for older children.
- Installing a MUGA, skate park and gym/exercise equipment.
- Heritage boards providing information on the history and heritage of the park and buildings.
- Commissioning and installing a series of sculptures.
- Picnic tables and seating throughout the park.
- Levelling and reseeding the area used for football.
- Employing a groundsman to maintain the park.

1.4. What happened after the restoration?

Following the restoration, Quorn Parish Council set up a sinking fund to provide dedicated funds for the ongoing maintenance of the park and its facilities. In order to maintain the high standards achieved by the restoration, a groundsman and an assistant are employed to look after the park. Additionally, a small team of volunteer park wardens, who tend to be older local residents, keep an eye on the park on an informal basis and report any issues to the parish council.

Once the restoration was complete, the council submitted a successful application for a Green Flag award and the project team reported that this had helped to ensure standards remained high in terms of maintaining the park:

'[Green Flag provides] the discipline really behind it, if you're going to apply for a Green Flag and have it inspected every year you've got some kind of monitoring of standards.'

Quorn Parish Council continues to manage and maintain Stafford Orchard, and are committed to continuing with the Green Flag award scheme. Most of the Parks for People project team have now retired from the parish council but remain active as members of the Stafford Orchard Advisory Group, advising the council on matters related to the park. Some members of the team expressed concerns that subsequent councillors may not be as invested in safeguarding the future of the park, particularly once the requirements for a management plan are fulfilled with the funder after 10 years, however the current parish council has made a long term commitment to maintaining the park (discussed in more detail in Challenges and Opportunities section).



Avenue of lime trees, January 2020. Photo: Cathy Harris

2. Involving the community

2.1. The project team

The Stafford Orchard project was led by volunteers from the local community. It is clear from interviews that the project team were (and continue to be) very passionate and committed to the redevelopment and maintenance of the park. The application process demanded significant time and energy over a number of years which the team fully embraced. The project team clearly feel a lot of pride in what they had achieved and look back fondly on the process. The team felt that being volunteers may have made them stronger as they were all working together with a shared purpose and bonded over the course of the project:

'We really kept this close knit team together and I think that was one of the secrets to success and we were really committed to it. We considered ourselves a proper team, whether you're a volunteer, a councillor, a professional advisor or whatever, it was considered a team.'

The importance of having a strong leader was also emphasised, as management of the application process required a long-term commitment and significant organisation:

'Having a strong leader made a huge difference to the project because it was a long period of time, it was years and at times were meeting every week, fortnightly and then it went to weekly.'

The team was primarily made up of members of Quorn Parish Council, although the project was undertaken separately to parish council activities. An advantage of this was that the project team were all members of the local community, which meant they understood what the community needed and wanted. The team also brought with them a range of skills and experience which helped them to allocate tasks and work well together:

'One of the key things was everyone had their niche of expertise and there wasn't overlap, everybody was good at one or two things and they took that as their area and that's how it all seemed to work.'

When they needed additional expertise, they brought this in. For example, the employment of a landscape architect was integral to the success of the bid. She became an important member of the team in terms of both professional expertise and her enthusiasm for the project personally:

'I think it is important that I'd lived in Charnwood and worked and done a lot of schemes working with Charnwood Borough Council in the past in conservation areas and that's given me a real passion for Charnwood. So, I feel really passionately about the project, about the village, about the lovely team of people I've met, so the glue that held us all together was really strong and continues.'

2.2. Community consultation

The Quorn project team carried out extensive consultation with the wider community throughout the project, from initial planning and application stages all the way through to post-project evaluations. For example, the team involved young people in the design of the play areas and skate ramps, and outdoor gym equipment was installed later following demand from the community. This level of community involvement meant that by the time the final plans were confirmed *'about 98% of the*

village that were surveyed approved of what we were doing which just drove us on because we knew we were on the right lines.'

The needs of the community were truly at the heart of the Stafford Orchard project, and this is reflected in the high levels of satisfaction reported in post-project surveys conducted by the project team. As one interviewee put it:

'The team carried the community with it, keeping people informed regularly about progress and seeking their views on all aspects of the project as it developed. This resulted in a high degree of satisfaction expressed in post-completion surveys.'

2.3. Volunteering

The community were also directly involved in implementing some of the improvements to the park, with volunteers planting 15,000 bulbs and completing the planting for the sensory garden. The community continues to be involved in the upkeep of the park today, with local volunteers contributing to horticulture, acting as park wardens and participating in the Stafford Orchard Advisory Group.

3. Improving health and wellbeing

3.1. Physical activity

Just over two thirds of respondents who completed the survey for this evaluation reported that the park had made a positive impact on their levels of physical activity. The improvements to the facilities available had clearly contributed to this. The facilities have continued to be developed and improved following the restoration with the addition of adult exercise equipment and a children's inclusive roundabout.

Several interviewees commented on the well-maintained marked perimeter path, which indicates that four laps of the path are a mile. Both young and old users found this beneficial, with younger people utilising it for running and training, and older people using it to keep fit and ensure they hit their daily exercise target. The play equipment for younger and older children, outdoor gym equipment, MUGA and skate park also promote physical activity and are reported to be popular and well-used. Football and rugby teams have also benefitted from improvements to the park, with the open space being levelled and maintained. New activities, including yoga classes, kettlebell classes and dog training, have been set up in the park since the restoration bringing people together and promoting physical activity.

'I think it's all positive. I think it's easier now for older people to enjoy it, there's more facilities for the children and young people cos the play equipment is fantastic and they've also got exercise equipment [...] they're quite often used. Joggers use [the park]... children, much more than it was used before. There used to be a lot of football games when it was just a field but they still go ahead, so we haven't lost anything we've just gained.'

Charnwood Borough Council also regularly utilise the park for events aimed at increasing physical activity. One employee described how they had hosted more events at Stafford Orchard than other parks in the borough. The size of the park and the range of facilities available make it a good choice for local events:

'Stafford Orchard is the area of choice for anybody who wants to hold a community event because it's right in the middle of the village and everybody knows where it is. It is clearly an asset to the village, people use it and they like it.'

Events such as National Play Days and treasure hunts aimed at getting families out together had been very popular. Safe, Well and Happy is a group based in a building next to the park which supports people with learning difficulties. They have found the park provides a welcoming and peaceful atmosphere for outdoor activities, including parachute games.

3.2. Mental health and wellbeing

Interviewees also described the benefits of the park for people's wellbeing, particularly in combating loneliness. Almost half of respondents who completed the survey for this evaluation reported that the park had made a positive impact on their mental health (45%) and around a third said that feelings of isolation had improved (34%). Interviewees also described how visiting the park was important for the wellbeing of local residents. One gave the example of a neighbour who was recently widowed and regularly met up with her friend to visit the park, which had stopped her from feeling isolated: 'They walk around the park every morning and it's a reason for her to get out of bed in the morning and they're both widows, they really look forward to it.'



Outdoor gym equipment, January 2020. Photo: Cathy Harris

4. Bringing people together

Since the restoration, the park has become much more of a focal point in the village. People feel that the restoration of the park has *'made more things happen in the village'*, giving different groups the opportunity to come together both formally, for regular activities and scheduled events, and informally, to socialise with friends and family. Open responses from the survey conducted for this evaluation suggest that people feel the park is now used by a broader range of people, and that in particular more families with children now use the park. The position of the community café next to the park provides mutual benefits with visitors often utilising both, and the clearly-marked entrances to the park encourage visitors to explore.

Stafford Orchard is now widely seen as a community hub, the heart of the community and the centre of activity in Quorn. One park user described how the park had influenced his decision to move to Quorn:

'When we moved here one of the, almost one of the deciding factors was we visited the park [...] And we literally realised what a lovely asset to the community it was.'

4.1. Number of visitors

The restoration of Stafford Orchard has been extremely successful in increasing use of the park. Previously, the park was quiet, prone to vandalism and was often used more as a thoroughfare rather than somewhere to spend a lot of time. As one resident put it, *'there wasn't really much reason to come down'*. As part of the restoration, iron arches were constructed at each entrance to the park, and the greater prominence of these entrances serves to attract people into the park. For example, the entrance next to the car park has been opened up and is now much more obvious to visitors to Quorn:

'That was one of the problems with the entrances, that if you did park in the village and didn't know the park was there, you weren't seeing it. That was one of the things [our landscape designer] helped us do, to increase that entrance, so we've now got a big entrance there with the arch that says Stafford Orchard so it's very obviously an entrance to the park.'

User surveys carried out by the project team highlighted that usage of the park had increased by over 100% (see further detail in Reducing Inequalities section) since the restoration. The results from the survey conducted during this evaluation confirm this, with 60% of respondents stating that they used the park more since the restoration: *'I've been down there with the dog in the afternoon on a glorious day and the park's been heaving with people which is exactly what we wanted.'*

The popularity of the park following the restoration was felt to be a result of the park now offering something for everyone. The park is often used for socialising casually which was clearly a source of enjoyment for a number of interviewees. For example, one commented that he and his wife would go and meet friends at the park on a nice evening and get chips from the chip shop next to the park. Others reported that families with young children would often meet in the park for picnics or to use the play equipment: *'It has everything really for a family, old and young alike'*

4.2. Events and activities

An annual May Day event has been held in the village for many years but has been revitalised in recent years since the restoration of Stafford Orchard, growing in size

and popularity and attracting people from beyond the village. Whilst the event would have likely still happened without the restoration of the park, respondents felt that it would not have been so well-attended or successful:

'Each year from 2013 onwards we've organised a May Day event which has gone from strength to strength. At the beginning it was just people from Quorn and the outlying villages but it's now gained in popularity and we get people from miles away who come every year and say "we wouldn't miss it, it's one of our favourite events".'

The May Day event is very community-focused, receiving sponsorship from a number of local businesses. Activities include local groups (e.g. bands and dance troupes) putting on performances, fundraising by local charities, and schools, churches, and local businesses selling food and drink. The event is clearly highly valued as a way of bringing the community together, with all interviewees speaking positively about it:

'One of the lovely things we see on May Day is friends and neighbours who haven't seen each other for some time all greeting each other and people bring picnic rugs and sit down together and it's such a wonderful atmosphere. It does bring the community together definitely.'

The performance area installed as part of the renovation has been well-utilised, including for outdoor performances and rock concerts. For example, the local Shakespeare company have put on two recent performances of Shakespeare plays in the park, one of which utilised the whole park, with different scenes in different areas. The option of having an outdoor venue to accommodate large casts and having the park as a backdrop has been very beneficial for the group. This also offers local residents the chance to watch an affordable Shakespeare play locally, and the outdoor setting is generally perceived to be more relaxed and accessible. These have increased opportunities to come together for social events for people from Quorn, as well as bringing visitors to the village from across Leicestershire.

Informally, a number of regular activities have been established as a result of the restoration including fitness training groups, dog training, rugby and football training. The increase and improvement in facilities in the park means that it is now used a lot more for informal gatherings, e.g. for families with children using the play equipment, for dog walkers, for picnics, and for interacting with nature.



Younger children's play equipment, Grand opening of Stafford Orchard, May 2011. Photo: Ivan Bexon

5. Engaging with nature and the environment

A key element of the Stafford Orchard project was to make improvements to the ecology within the park, improving habitats for wildlife and providing a natural environment that park users could experience and enjoy. This involved planting of trees and shrubs throughout the park. Gaps in existing hedgerows were filled and new hedgerows were created to maintain and increase the feeding corridors for wildlife. Volunteers planted fifteen thousand spring bulbs and a sensory garden was created at the Station Road end of the park. The plants were carefully chosen to provide colour, fragrance and interest at all times of year. Native wildflower seeds were planted to encourage new wildlife habitats.



Sensory garden, January 2020. Photo: Cathy Harris

An area of the park, including a brook which was not owned by the council was purchased and integrated. Extensive development of this area is not permitted as it is a floodplain, however willows and waterside plants have been established in this area. Equipment is provided for pond-dipping which allows park users to engage with nature and wildlife directly: *'The brook is a lovely feature. We actually have trout in it and the ducks are there and the children can look for tadpoles and things.'*

The additional paths and seating installed throughout the park as part of the project allow people to easily enjoy and engage with the environment. The results from the survey conducted during this evaluation support this – just over half of respondents reported that the park had made a positive impact on their connection to nature – and interviewees spoke very positively about the design of the gardens, the planting and the wildlife:

'I just remember it as being an open field [before the refurbishment]. It was quite a pretty area at certain times but it's absolutely beautiful now. The planting's great, it's really well-maintained.'

Participants also valued the volunteers who help to maintain the park and engage park users with nature: *'The volunteers that do work there do a fantastic job of telling you what's been planted, or what wildlife you can expect to see.'*

5.1. Engaging with heritage

As part of the Parks for People project, iron arches were constructed at each entrance to the park and they have been named to reflect the considerable historical heritage of the park. Heritage boards close to the park entrances provide information on the history of the park.

A memorial for the 82nd Airborne, an American division who camped in Quorn during World War 2, was improved as part of the Parks for People project. An entrance was dedicated to them and gaps in the avenue of lime trees were filled.



82nd Airborne park entrance. Photo: Ivan Bexon

6. Reducing inequalities

A key feature of the project was to improve access to the park, and this was achieved through improving entrances, widening and resurfacing existing paths, and creating new paths (including a path around the perimeter of the park).

The perimeter path has been one of the most impactful changes to the park. Although a relatively small change in terms of the scale of the project overall, this path is seen to have made the park a destination where people will come to walk around and spend leisure time. Previously, the main path cut across the park meaning it was generally used as a cut-through. The improvements to the paths and entrances have also improved accessibility, opening up the park for more people, e.g. families with pushchairs, people with mobility issues or disabilities.

'You see a lot of elderly people walking round or people being pushed in wheelchairs. [...] now they've got this circuitous route it's easy now to push a chair right the way round, where beforehand it was all grass at one stage which is much more difficult.'

'The park is disabled-friendly and my son was in a wheelchair and we could take him to the park it was accessible for everyone, wheelchairs, pushchairs, elderly people, everyone across the community. It is easily accessible and it is all on one level which is important.'

The landscape designer, employed as part of the project, described how improving accessibility was a key consideration in the design of all elements of the restoration:

'The whole park is designed so it's accessible and suitable for people of all abilities and the footpath width, the surfacing materials, the gradients, everything was taken into consideration to try and ensure that we didn't put in barriers to people using the park.'

The project team carried out user surveys¹ on two days in May/June 2008 and two comparable days in May/June 2012 to evaluate the success of the project in increasing visitor numbers. These found that numbers of visitors were over 100% higher in 2012 compared to 2008. Particular increases were seen across specific target groups, including families, older people and people with disabilities (see table 1, below).

Table 1: Change in park use over time

	2008	2012 target	2012 actual	Target increase (%)	Actual increase (%)
Individuals in family groups	282	564	702	100%	149%
Over 65s	57	79	147	100%	158%
Users with disabilities	8	16	25	100%	213%
Overall	942	1290	1908	37%	103%

Source: Survey conducted by Stafford Orchard Parks for People project team

¹ These surveys took the form of a census / user number count. Volunteers covered every entrance to the park and followed strict guidance to ensure 'like with like' comparison.

Participants felt that Stafford Orchard now provided a safe environment for everyone to enjoy. Previously the park had become quite run-down with graffiti and broken glass putting people off using the park, whereas now the park is seen as welcoming and safe for all. Given the much higher quality of facilities provided and the ongoing maintenance of the park by the groundsman and volunteers, there is now a '*sense of village pride in the park, everybody is looking out to keep it as best as they can*'.



Performance area, Grand opening of Stafford Orchard, May 2011. Photo: Ivan Bexon

7. Supporting the local economy

There was some anecdotal evidence that the restoration of Stafford Orchard had supported the local economy. The location of the park is a key factor in this as it is very central in the village. The development of the community café and library next to the park provides mutual benefits, with visitors to the park dropping into the café and vice versa. There is a sense that the whole area has been revitalised and the park has become a focal point in the village:

'I think it's become the centre of the village in many ways. It's lucky it's got the village shops which are so close anyway, but it really has become a focal point and I think the opening of the café has contributed to that as well.'

Events such as the May Day Event and plays put on by the Shakespeare company also bring in visitors from outside the village, sometimes in their thousands, providing clear benefits to the wider economy:

'I think the local shops and hospitality industry do welcome it. When the sort of thing like a May Day event is happening in the park the pubs are heaving all around the village, not just the ones near the park, the whole village seems to benefit.'

Additionally, the park provides volunteering opportunities, such as for park wardens or for organising events.



Older children's play equipment, January 2020. Photo: Cathy Harris

8. Stafford Orchard during Covid-19

During the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020, we interviewed five park users to find out more about what they valued about Stafford Orchard and how restrictions on movement and activities were affecting them. Their experiences are summarised below.

Interviewees (All names have been changed to protect anonymity):

- **Michael**, 43, has lived in Quorn for 6 years, around 1 mile away from Stafford Orchard. He is married with two young children aged 4 and 1.
- **Nathan**, 54, lives on the edge of Quorn with his wife and dog, and has lived there for the past 6 years.
- **Ellen**, 60, retired, lives alone with her dog about a ten minute walk from Stafford Orchard.
- **Richard**, 32, lives with his wife a couple of villages away from Quorn.
- **Olivia**, 79, retired, lives in her own home within a retirement complex about a ten minute walk from Stafford Orchard.

8.1. Before lockdown

All but one respondent said that they or their families were daily or near daily users of the park, and it was generally perceived as the 'heart of the community' (Nathan). Olivia reported taking part in regular activities held in Stafford Orchard, which was the over 60s group who meet weekly in the old school hall in the park which is now used as a library and tearoom/café.

The park's location at the centre of the village and proximity of local amenities, such as supermarkets and eateries/takeaways, was cited by participants as a big attraction. Stafford Orchard hosts a varied programme of events throughout the year which users reported were well attended. Every participant mentioned the May Day event which is usually held, and people also mentioned theatre productions such as a Shakespeare play which had been hosted in 2019. Nathan and Ellen both walked their dogs frequently in Stafford Orchard, and used the space for socialising, meeting friends and going to the café. Michael, who has two children under 5, said that before lockdown his wife would go to the park every day to use the playground. As well as attending the weekly over 60s meet-up in the old school hall, Olivia used the park several times a week to get some exercise and enjoy the sensory garden. Richard, who lived a couple of villages away from Quorn, said he would normally go to Stafford Orchard a few times a month, mostly for the scenery but also to take exercise. He commented that in comparison to the parks in his own village, Stafford Orchard was better maintained.

8.2. During the lockdown

Lockdown inevitably had an impact on the activities people were able to do in the park, which had led to changes in the way the park was used. On one hand, some people reported that Stafford Orchard had been much quieter than usual because children were unable to use any of the play equipment, meaning that families were visiting less frequently. Michael and his family had only visited Stafford Orchard three or four times during lockdown, simply to walk around the perimeter path. The closure of the playground meant that the utility of the park for him and his family had become fairly limited. They had found some substitutes for the time they would normally have

spent in Stafford Orchard, including a nature trail on the other side of the village which they had not been to before.

Similarly, the suspension of activities and closure of the café meant that visitor numbers had decreased, and most interviewees reported missing the social and community aspects of the park. Richard, who did not live in the village, found that his reasons for going to Quorn - which were often to take advantage of the better amenities such as the shops and eateries as well as visiting Stafford Orchard – were removed while these facilities remained closed.

Most interviewees also expressed disappointment at the cancellation of major events, particularly the annual May Day event, which brings a large number of people together (from Quorn and beyond) and supports local businesses and groups.

However, some users had continued to use the park as normal. Ellen and Nathan reported that they were actually using the park more frequently for walking their dogs, whereas they may have previously had the option to drive elsewhere.

Some respondents had noticed a big increase in the number of people using Stafford Orchard as a place for exercise, picnics and barbecues, especially during the spell of good weather. Ellen observed whole families using the park more frequently for exercise, including cycling and walking:

'It's been nice to see families using it more often other than at the weekends when maybe they might have done it, you know, or played football or whatever.'
(Ellen)

Access to outdoor space was felt to be particularly important for people during lockdown, and interviewees noted the different experiences of those who had access to a garden compared to those who did not:

'I think because obviously everybody being at home [during lockdown], there are a few apartments, apartment blocks, that won't have their own greenspace, but normally they would perhaps be at work, but you don't want to sit in an apartment do you?'

However, the increased use of parks by certain groups had led to concerns around antisocial behaviour. Dog fouling, littering, people drinking and using drugs and gatherings of young people were regarded as the main issues, although some interviewees stressed that young people had few other places to go to.

People generally felt that park usage would return to normal after lockdown was lifted (*'it's the heart of the village and I think as soon as people can they will just flock'*) and hoped that events and activities would be able to resume too. However, there was some concern that it may take a while to return to normal as some of the larger events required longer lead times for planning. For example, Charnwood Borough Council had to cancel their entire summer activity programme which would have included events at Stafford Orchard.

8.3. Summary

Key benefits and challenges of the Covid-19 lockdown for Stafford Orchard are summarised below:

Park users were unable to use the park for a range of activities due to restrictions, including:

- closure of the children's play equipment and gym equipment
- suspension of organised sports and groups
- closure of the adjacent café and library
- restrictions on meeting other households
- cancellation of major events held in the park
-

However, some benefits were observed, including:

- more frequent use of the park by some groups, e.g. dog walkers
- increase in use of the park for exercise, such as walking, jogging and cycling
- whole families spending time together in the park
- providing access to outdoor space for those who did not have it at home

9. Challenges and opportunities

9.1. The project

The Parks for People funding application process itself was challenging in terms of the time and effort required to complete the process, particularly as a group of volunteers (discussed in further detail in the Learning Points section). However, the team took this challenge on positively and proactively. The project team found the experience rewarding and felt that being volunteers and having personal connections to the village and the park helped them to remain committed throughout the process.

Additionally, although the length and in-depth nature of the process had been challenging for the team, they felt that this had given them time and space to develop their vision and continually consult with local residents to ensure that the park restoration would meet the needs of the local community:

'What we finished up with was a kind of overall consensus about what this park was going to look like at the end from the professional point of view, from the project team's point of view and from the villagers' point of view so everybody in the end was singing from the same hymn sheet. So it wasn't a vision, it evolved, we knew we wanted something better, at the outset we didn't know what it was but we did by the end.'

The extensive consultation undertaken by the project team with the community over the course of the application and delivery of the project meant that they were largely able to deliver what the community wanted, and the popularity of the park is a testament to this.

Only a few minor disagreements had been reported. One of these related to a fun fair that took place on the park each year prior to the restoration. The team had initially planned to continue to allow this to happen, however later decided that this was not feasible due to the damage caused by vehicles during this event. This had led to a few complaints from local residents. One member of the project team also mentioned that they had received some feedback suggesting that dog walking in the park should be restricted, however the team felt that this would be a negative step as a large number of park users have dogs and the majority are responsible. Also, regular dog shows in the park attract people from beyond the village to Stafford Orchard.

9.2. The future of the park

The project team expressed some concerns over the future maintenance of the park. Most of the original project team have now retired from the parish council, meaning others now have responsibility for management of the park, and may not necessarily have the same level of commitment to the maintenance of the park. The project team stressed the importance of ongoing maintenance and investment to ensure the park does not *'gradually deteriorate to the point where people don't have enough resources to restore them to what they should be'*. The parish council had set up a sinking fund at the time of the Parks for People project to provide dedicated funds for the maintenance of the park and its facilities, however since then this fund has been closed and the money transferred into general reserves. Members of the project team felt that there was therefore a risk that funds would not be available or allocated for future maintenance of the park. One interviewee suggested that The National Lottery Community Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund should stipulate a longer-term management plan for funded projects to avoid this situation:

'I would be asking [the funders] to demand that the management plan element of the fund requirements is extended from 10 years to 20, or longer, the longer the better. I have heard a councillor sit there and say "won't it be wonderful when we get to the end of Stafford Orchard's 10 year plan then we can ditch it?". I am quoting him to you, he'd got no interest in Stafford Orchard.'

However, they felt that a number of factors mitigated this risk, the first of which is the employment of the Grounds and Facilities Officer and assistant who look after the park (and other recreational spaces). Secondly, although some previous councillors have expressed a lack of commitment to the park, the current parish council has publicly committed itself to ongoing support of the park financially, recognising the innate value of the park to the village. The park is included in the village's strategic plan as an individual item. The Quorn Neighbourhood Plan (2018-2036), agreed following public consultation, and which forms part of Charnwood Borough Council's Strategic Plan, recognises Stafford Orchard as a *'particularly valued amenity'* and *'an important open space'*. The plan includes Stafford Orchard within its *'policies that aim to retain, protect and enhance these important community assets'* which should ensure it is maintained and protected in the longer term. The parish council also continues to submit annual Green Flag applications, which the project team feel help to maintain momentum and motivation to ensure the park is properly maintained.

An ongoing threat to the future of the park is the need for additional parking in the village, and the possibility of converting part of Stafford Orchard for this purpose has been suggested. The central location of the park and the opening of the community café and library in the old school building adjacent to the park contributes to this risk. There would clearly be opposition to this from the members of the project team and members of the wider community. Interviewees suggested that there would be a referendum in the village and potentially a legal challenge as the park was bequeathed to the people of Quorn with a stipulation that there should not be any building on the site.

The car park adjacent to the park is currently managed by Charnwood Borough Council and is free to use resulting in it often being filled with commuters' vehicles who travel onwards to work in Loughborough. Some locals felt that if this was owned by the parish council there would be an opportunity to generate income, as well as providing parking for visitors to the village, thus solving parking issues (and the risk of development on the park) and potentially further increasing footfall to the park.

10. Learning points

1. The scale of a project like this can be challenging for a group of volunteers. The group found the process bureaucratic at times and very labour-intensive. This process would likely be off-putting to other groups who may be unable to commit the time and effort required to complete the application.
2. Strong relationships and teamwork are essential for the success of the project. Despite the challenges of the process the project team retained the commitment, motivation and shared vision to continue driving the project forward in a positive way.
3. Meaningful consultation with the local community can be key to the success of a project like this. The Stafford Orchard project team involved the community in the process from start to finish and this is reflected in the levels of satisfaction with the refurbishment and the popularity of the park today.
4. The timing of applications for funding can have a significant impact. The Parks for People project came at a good time for Stafford Orchard, as the parish council were struggling to fund management and improvement of the park, and were looking for opportunities for funding and support. However, if they had been able to acquire the old school building earlier they may have been able to include the development of the community café and the library in their bid for funding.
5. A long-term management plan is important to safeguard the future of parks in receipt of funding. The Stafford Orchard project team expressed a number of concerns over future investment in and maintenance of the park once the requirement of the funder for a 10 year management plan had been fulfilled. This was felt to be a particular risk as the original project team members had retired from the parish council. However, the current council has demonstrated long-term commitment to the park through the Quorn Neighbourhood Plan (2018-36).



Heritage board, January 2020. Photo: Cathy Harris

11. Conclusion: the difference Parks for People has made

The team of volunteers who undertook the Stafford Orchard project described how before they heard about the Parks for People funding they had been looking at ways to make improvements to Stafford Orchard, but were struggling to do so due to lack of funds. The funding was *'the vehicle we needed to take this forward'*.

- The improvements made to the park as a result of the Parks for People funding have created a number of benefits for the local community:
 - Increasing levels of physical activity: This has been achieved through the creation of an accessible perimeter path, installation of play equipment, outdoor gym equipment, skate ramps, a MUGA, and levelling and maintenance of open space for exercise.
 - Improving mental health and wellbeing: The restoration has helped in combating loneliness by creating a safe, accessible and pleasant space for socialising.
 - Bringing people together: Significant improvements to the facilities available have made Stafford Orchard a community hub where people come together informally and for a range of activities and events.
 - Engaging with nature and the environment: Significant investment in planting and improving habitats has created a number of areas within the park where users can experience and enjoy the natural environment, wildlife and ecology.
 - Heritage: The considerable historical heritage of the park is now highlighted and preserved with named entrances, information boards, and a memorial to the 82nd Airborne.
 - Reducing inequalities: Improvements to entrances and paths, has made the park more accessible, for example, for older people, people with disabilities and families with young children.
 - Supporting the local economy: The park has become a focal point in the village and the location of the community café provides mutual benefits. Large scale events bring in visitors from outside the village which support local businesses.

The passion and commitment of the project team was clearly a huge factor in the success of this project, and their involvement of the local community throughout the process enabled them to achieve a park which has *'something for everyone'* and is described as the *'heart of the village'*.

'Very simply without the funding the project wouldn't have taken place and wouldn't have been the monumental success that it has been. I go down there every day and people use it. People are enjoying it far more than they ever used to. It's one the best projects I've ever been involved in in my personal life and my professional life. The results have been fantastic and I'm so proud to have been involved in it.'

Appendix 1: Methodology

Research for this case study took place between January and July 2020. The following research activities were carried out:

1. Reviewing project application documents provided by The National Lottery Community Fund and The National Lottery Heritage Fund.
2. Initial visit to the park (including a meeting with three members of the project team and a tour of the park).
3. Online focus group with the project team (six participants).
4. Telephone interviews with five stakeholders (including a volunteer park warden, an employee of Charnwood Borough Council, the coordinator of the local amateur dramatics company, a member of the village events team and another member of the project team).
5. Survey data (139 respondents from Quorn).
6. Analysis of secondary data provided by the project team (including previous user survey results, the Stafford Orchard section of the village website, the Quorn Neighbourhood Plan, Green Flag Award documentation).
7. Telephone interviews with five park users (recruited through the survey) to discuss their experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The participants are not a representative sample of the population but are knowledgeable about the project and the local area and in many cases have been involved in community activities connected to the project.

Appendix 2: About the area

Local Health

	Quorn and Mountsorrel Castle Ward	Charnwood	England
Limiting long term illness or disability, 2011	15.4%	15.6%	17.6%
Households that experience fuel poverty, 2016	9.6%	10.8%	11.1%
People aged 65 and over living alone, 2011	30.6%	29.3%	31.5%
Life expectancy			
At birth for males, 2013-2017 (years)	84.2	80.6	79.5
At birth for females, 2013-2017 (years)	85.6	83.8	83.1

Source: ONS and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Index of Multiple Deprivation

	2010		2015		2019	
	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile	IMD Rank	IMD Decile
Charnwood 012B	28,112	9	28,428	9	29,356	9

Source: English Indices of Deprivation, MHCLG.

Note: Data is included at LSOA level (Lower Layer Super Output Area).

Economic Activity

Economic activity rate – aged 16-64	Loughborough	England
2005	78.3%	76.6%
2010	71.6%	76.3%
2015	69.6%	77.9%
2019	78.9%	79.2%

Source: Annual Population Survey, ONS.

Note: Data is included parliamentary constituency level (Loughborough).

Housing Market

	2010		2015		2019	
	LE12 8 postcode	Charnwood	LE12 8 postcode	Charnwood	LE12 8 postcode	Charnwood
Average residential property price	£250,119	£185,128	£304,132	£211,653	£319,800	£251,653

Source: HM Land Registry.