

Appendix 5

South Park Education Strategy, Darlington Borough Council

“South Park and Schools: Utilising the Park as an Educational Resource for Schools and Community Groups”

1. Introduction

For many years South Park in Darlington has proved a popular location for school groups to visit. In an age when many children view the outside world through TV screens, computer screens and windows it provides a place where children can get close to wildlife and the outdoor world. South Park has also been used over the years by many other community groups, associations and special interest groups as a focus for educational activities and events.

At present South Park is being transformed by a restoration project funded primarily by the Heritage Lottery Fund as well as other funding partners such as the County Durham Environmental Trust (CDENT) and Darlington Borough Council.

One of the aims of the Heritage Lottery Funded restoration is to enhance South Park as an educational resource through the improvement of all key areas in the park as well as the construction of a new Education Centre.

Much consultation has been carried out already and what follows is an outline strategy reflecting this to date. More consultation is planned in the coming months and this document highlights how this will be achieved. In early 2006 it is envisaged that a final document will be produced reflecting the additional consultation that has taken place as well as an evaluation of the first few months of trial educational activities.

2. Vision

South Park will be an excellent educational facility with a primary focus on wildlife and the environment. The combination of a fantastic outdoor classroom (the park itself) with a well-equipped indoor facility (the new Education Centre) and trained and experienced staff will provide what is needed for an innovative mix of stimulating, well-planned and fun activities and events. Not only will this provide schools with an additional resource for the delivery of certain elements of the National Curriculum but it will also provide special needs schools with a new place to bring children and young people for different types of sensory stimulation and input.

As well as schools South Park will be an excellent venue for all sorts of educational events and initiatives involving other community groups and associations who want to engage with and explore the outdoor world.

3. The facilities available

The Park itself

South Park provides a wonderful outdoor classroom and used in the right way can provide one of the best types of environments to enable children and all age groups to “get close” to wildlife and the natural world. The park has a river, lake, and trees from all over the world, animal enclosures, gardens and a rich diversity of its own wildlife.

Getting closer to any of these elements opens up a whole new world of tiny creatures and plants and great opportunities for exploration. As part of the restoration project a new Sensory Garden is being created that will open up a whole new experience for people with visual impairment and those with learning difficulties.

Signage and interpretation

Information and educational signage around the park is being greatly improved in order to draw better attention to key features, including aspects of wildlife and the natural environment. There will also be new leaflets available some of which will focus on different types of nature trails. A separate leaflet is being produced for children.

The new Education Centre

This is a new build as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded restoration project and provides space for an indoor classroom facility and venue for different types of community events and activities. The centre will be equipped with different types of educational equipment suitable for exploring the outdoor world as well as books, field charts, packs and all the stationary needed for children to let their imaginations run wild. There will also be special equipment provided for use by children with learning difficulties. For example, sand trays and special tools have been acquired after consultation with a school for children with learning difficulties in the local area.

The furniture for the new centre is being made by prisons across the region as part of the Restorative Justice Program

Trained and experienced staff

In order to deliver a well-run park and a good educational program of events and activities full-time staff are based on site in the park offices that are located next to the new Education Centre. One dedicated member of staff will take primary responsibility for the park's education service who has experience in working with schools and is in the process of receiving new training.

4. **Previous involvement of schools at South Park**

Over the past few years the main type of association that schools have had with South Park has been through visits organised by the schools themselves. The school groups have looked after themselves and any educational input has been provided by teachers and through curricular activities back at school. Up until mid-2004 this was quite ad hoc. However, from the middle of 2004 once the new staff were settled in school groups have been invited to the park by park staff and those that would be visiting anyway have been offered guided walks in order to involve the children and teachers in all that is going on within the restoration project. Park staff have also gone out to do talks and run classes in several schools in the local area.

Some schools have had a more active involvement in some of the restoration project with one school class dressing up in Victorian costume to help launch the new park gates along with horse and carriage. This involvement has been seen as an important part in generating real ownership in the park as it is being restored and ensuring that children as well as the general public are offered opportunities to understand all that is being done.

5. **Current and planned consultation**

The experience of the past year has not only given schools, teachers and children more of a glimpse of what the real potential of South Park is for them but it has also provided park staff and teachers with an opportunity to discuss the sorts of things that are most wanted and needed in the future. Some good ideas have been put forward which has helped to inform the type of equipment that has so far been purchased for the new centre. An example of this was consultation with a school for children with learning difficulties. As a result of this a need and design for sand trays was agreed and these have now been produced by one of the prisons in the area.

Discussions have taken place with teachers and head teachers and a suggestion was put forward that schools be approached with a questionnaire. Knowing how stretched school staff can be we decided to make this as user-friendly as possible and rather than sending paper (yet another form to fill in) it was decided to produce a short film.

Throughout the year we are using an experienced Filmmaker and Producer to put together a film at the end covering the entire restoration project. However, during the course of the project the aim is to produce several short video clips

for the web site.

The new DVD for schools, which is currently being distributed, lasts five minutes and shows what is happening at the park from a schools point of view as well as highlighting opportunities for the future. It asks teachers to provide their ideas and input. This will be followed up with a letter to encourage teachers to invite park staff into schools to discuss ideas. There are also plans for a gathering of Primary school teachers and this will be organised by park staff and two teachers who have already suggested this as a good way forward.

Naturally we are not expecting involvement from all, but we want to ensure that every school in the Borough is offered an opportunity to have their say.

Park staff has also visited other parks across the North East who offer an educational facility to find out how they run things. A key question that has been asked is, given a blank canvas, how would you set up your education program given what you have learnt. Much has been learnt from these visits.

6. **Fitting into the National Curriculum**

Experience from other centres across the region as well as feedback from schools suggests that we will be mainly catering for 5-11 year olds and looking to link any activities into key stages 1 and 2. There are a number of areas within the National Curriculum into which anything that is offered at South Park can fit. Science – Key Stages 1 and 2 are obvious areas.

It is also important that we are not just seen to be filling gaps in the core curriculum but offering children as wide an experience of the natural world as we can. Activities that are fun and use as many of the senses as possible and look to stretch imaginations will be what we look to provide. We also want to ensure that activities reflect the growing need for physical exercise and healthier lifestyles.

We are very aware that in many ways we want to try and break the link with school at South Park so that children don't just see it as an extension of the school experience with all the baggage that goes along with that. As well as imaginative activities we will also be looking to give the new education centre a name so that associations with school and education are lessened. Ideas for that name are currently being sought and once in place it will be used as a brand around which we can promote events and activities. Anything that we do offer will continually evolve as a result of continued consultation as well as our growing experience.

7. **Community and Special Interest Groups**

A number of different groups already use the park for a variety of educational purposes. Naturalist Societies, Bat Watch Groups, Orienteering groups to name but a few.

In the future the aim is to promote South Park much more pro-actively to these and many other groups and open up the new facilities for them to use. As part of this the plan is to start holding regular events and activities to generate a greater interest and involvement in the natural world as well as broader environmental issues. We will also look to host special interest workshops taking in anything from basket weaving to story telling and drama.

Under-pinning all of this is a keen desire to open up the park to new groups and to ensure that we don't just cater for minority interests. However, part of the challenge is to make any minority interests more attractive and accessible. Bat watch events are but one example, seen by many as not their sort of thing. However, once someone has tried one and seen how much fun they can be they often come back.

8. **Next steps**

Consultation will be on going and we envisage that the first new educational initiatives will begin in mid-September 2005. An evaluation will be carried out in early 2006 and a final paper outlining the education strategy for South Park will be produced.

Paul Place
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