



Above: Lancaster Court estate in west London before and after its transformation
Right: Clive Minorf and Michael Mott (far right) prune the gardens

Eighteen months ago, the playground at the centre of the Lancaster Court estate in Hammersmith & Fulham, west London, was a depressing sight.

'It wasn't very friendly - concrete and a couple of old swings,' says Derek Finch, chair of the local residents' association. Overlooked by housing blocks on three sides, the space was surrounded by a tall hedge that created blind spots for anyone hoping to loiter unseen.

Today it looks a little different. The playground has been rebuilt with a spruced up new layout. Wide grass verges are bordered by shrubberies and unobtrusive railings. There are still swings, but they gleam and hang over a bright blue patch of soft rubber.

This £97,000 makeover, paid for by the council and funds raised by environmental charity Groundwork, has transformed a foreboding corner of the estate into an attractive, open and colourful space.

Housing estates across the country could no doubt benefit from a similar facelift. But there's much more to reinvigorating green spaces in areas of social housing than just prettification, as a new 12-month partnership project called Neighbourhoods Green (see box: Good neighbours) aims to demonstrate.

Its partners include the National

Housing Federation, Groundwork and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. A report published by CABE last year found that those living in deprived areas have far worse access to public green spaces than those from more affluent neighbourhoods. A second report, published by the design watchdog in July, argued that the provision of well-maintained green spaces, tailored to individual communities, is a 'hugely effective' way to tackle health inequalities and to improve local residents' quality of life.

"Access to green space can facilitate activity, which can help to lower cholesterol and reduce obesity and diabetes."

Green dream

'Access to green space can facilitate activity, which can help to lower cholesterol and reduce obesity and diabetes,' says Nicola Durrant, project co-ordinator at Neighbourhoods Green. Provide well-maintained outdoor spaces and people will use them.

Mental wellbeing can also be positively affected. Public spaces on an

estate are, after all, where residents most often interact and neglected patches of weedy asphalt are not conducive to a pleasant natter. Part of the reason for that, says Ms Durrant, is a perception that such spaces are purposeless - they simply fill in the gaps between housing blocks and become the sort of no-man's-land that can attract anti-social behaviour.

'By changing the approach to that green space and encouraging more positive activity, it can move that sort of behaviour out of that space,' she adds.

Proud achievement

Involving residents in the renovation and maintenance of these neglected areas can give them a sense of ownership - and, as has happened in Lancaster Court and on the Waterworks estate in Birmingham (see box, overleaf: Turning on the Waterworks), pride in and ownership of the public realm repels anti-social elements. You might call it the unbroken window effect. 'It hasn't been subjected to vandalism [since the makeover],' says Mr Finch of the Lancaster Court playground. 'To date, touch wood, we haven't had any problems there with groups of youths or damage or anything.'

The playground has been well maintained throughout its first year. It still has a fresh and ordered feel; the shrubs are pruned and the grass edges neatly clipped. The space itself is litter-free, with barely a dead leaf in sight.

The site has benefited from the attention of the five men in the white van who have just arrived. It doesn't take long - secateurs, clippers, strimmer and leaf-blower get the job done very quickly. These groundsmen are evidence of another social benefit provided by greater investment in these green spaces, because until they began a 13-week horticultural training course with Hammersmith & Fulham Council's grounds maintenance contractor Quadron, each man had ▶

Good neighbours

Neighbourhoods Green is a partnership project, based at the National Housing Federation, designed to highlight the importance of green space for residents of social housing.

It is co-funded by its partners - CABE, Natural England, Groundwork UK and the Green Flag Plus Partnership to the tune of £60,000.

Over the next year, the project aims to develop resources and knowledge on which social landlords can draw to

improve the green spaces on and around their estates. It will also, says partnership co-ordinator Nicola Durrant, act as a champion of 'the role of green space in place-making' by influencing 'relevant government departments and agencies to encourage policy and strategy that acknowledges the role of green space in social housing'.

The project website is due to be launched this week at www.neighbourhoodsgreen.org.uk



Improving open spaces can improve health and wellbeing, curb anti-social behaviour, encourage residents to interact and create jobs. *Simon Brandon* outlines how the green-fingered approach works. Photography by *Simon Brandon*



Weed 'em and reap



Great outdoors: Pictured from left Michael Mott, Clive Minorf, Terry Fox, Paul Carverhill and James McManus were all long-term unemployed before joining the Lancaster Court scheme

been long-term unemployed.

'A year ago I asked for a course like this [at the Job Centre],' says trainee Michael Mott. 'They said there weren't any and offered me a computer course instead. I refused. Not my thing. Then this came along.'

'Most of us have been working outside and we want to stay outside,' agrees his colleague James McManus. 'Put me in an office? No way.'

Back into the field

Most of the men lost their jobs when the construction industry crashed in 2009, but this course offered a way back into work in a field they all enjoy. The benefits extend to the contractor, too, as Iain McCready, senior contract manager at Quadron, explains.

"Most of us have been working outside and we want to stay outside. Put me in an office? No way."

'We got involved on this contract three years ago - Groundwork approached us [about taking on unemployed trainees] and we were happy to get involved. At the end of the 13 weeks they go to work in a park, as part of our team - and then if we've got positions available, they come and work for us,' he says. 'It's an investment. It works for us; the guys learn how to do the job and we get the benefit of that at the end.' He hopes to be able to take on 'one or two' of the group, through an agency, come the spring.

And of course it makes sense to use what Mr McCready calls 'third-sector workers' - unpaid trainees, who remain on jobseekers' allowance throughout - at a time when money is tight. In Hammersmith & Fulham, Mr

McCready's patch, trainees account for around 10 per cent of the contractor's workforce. Quadron has trained 80 clients in Hammersmith & Fulham and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea over the past two years. Of those, 34 have gone into work as a result, 16 with the contractor itself.

Reaping the benefits

The Neighbourhoods Green project's job over the next year is to demonstrate and persuade social landlords of these benefits. Maintaining green spaces to a high standard

doesn't have to mean new investment either, according to Ms Durrant. 'It doesn't have to cost any more, it could be a different way of doing things,' she says. 'For example, instead of quantity-based maintenance contracts, like cutting the grass 12 times a year, why not cut the lawn when it needs to be cut instead and use the extra time and resources to [attend to] the needs of the landscape itself?'

It's hard to see a downside. Improved health and wellbeing, a lower incidence of anti-social behaviour, more interaction between

residents, training and opportunity for the unemployed and a greater sense of ownership - is this really the difference between a patch of well-riddled concrete and a well-tended and cared-for communal area?

At Lancaster Court, the changes have been obvious to, and welcomed by, Mr Finch. 'It has proved very popular,' he says. 'It's nice to see the young ones there with the parents. It's definitely used more than it used to be.'

 For more on green spaces, visit www.insidehousing.co.uk

Turning on the Waterworks

On the Waterworks estate in Edgbaston, Birmingham, Chris Hoare, a local resident and community activist, has just bid goodbye to a contingent of Chinese police.

'They were supposed to come at nine this morning and stay for an hour - they didn't leave until 1.20 pm,' he says. 'They wanted to see how groups like ours interact with our police and also they wanted to see how we interact with groups like [environmental charity] Groundwork. We took them round all our gardens today; they have actually taken the plans back to China.'

The Chinese cops are not the only foreign contingent to have visited this small housing estate. The Mexican and French governments have also sent delegates to learn from the transformation wrought by Mr Hoare and his fellow residents over the past 15 years. The Waterworks estate used to be blighted by drugs and prostitution. Today, according to Mr Hoare, it is practically crime-free.

The physical transformation has, he says, helped residents take back ownership of their estate. Jacqueline Caseman, a landscape architect with



Spruced up: The Waterworks estate in Edgbaston before and after

Groundwork West Midlands, has worked with the Waterworks' residents on these improvements. She sees the landscape improvements as 'something tangible', a physical representation of the social improvements that had already taken place and as a shared expression of community and solidarity

among the estate's inhabitants.

'The shared space is where residents come together and the respect and regard you have for your neighbours is reflected in the respect and regard and the care you have for the space that you share,' she argues. 'And there is also, I believe, a territorial aspect to it. It says to other people - this is our space and we value it.'

Both Ms Caseman and Mr Hoare share the belief that this sense of ownership has helped to maintain the estate's new character.

'Before, we had green spaces that were totally neglected, that were just becoming rubbish tips,' says Mr Hoare. 'Now we've got gardens where the residents actually do the lawn-mowing and the weeding. We went from a very bad place to a beautiful place where people want to live. Since we started this, we've had no damage, there's been no crime or graffiti.'

'The spaces are being used in the summer every night of the week, because we put solar lighting in. The kids sit out with their parents and it's absolutely lovely to hear them. That never happened before.'