

Lower Spen Nature Reserve, Ravensthorpe

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Context

Kirklees (Metropolitan Council) is a poor area relative to the rest of W. Yorks. It is one of the few flat areas in the county with a high proportion of countryside. The economy is based on manufacturing. With a population of around 850 thousand, there is high unemployment and lots of empty council housing. People get 'dumped' here.

Batley and Dewsbury were Irish areas, but now have large Gujarati communities. Dewsbury has one of the largest areas of derelict land in the UK – ex canal and railway land.

Ravensthorpe is more multicultural, with more scattered populations, and less social cohesion. There are housing, crime and drugs issues. Ravensthorpe was once home to Italian, Polish and Ukrainian communities (did people assimilate or move away?) It is currently 50:50 white: Asian, of which mainly Kashmiri / Mirpuri (speaking Urdu or Punjabi) plus a few Indians (no Bangladeshis) with lots of refugees and asylum seekers – mainly Iraqi Kurds and Africans. There are a handful of Bosnians and Croatians. The white population is ageing compared to the younger Asian population profile. Culturally, there is a significant 'generation gap' in the Asian community.





Conservation

Wildspace! Is a national programme run by English Nature and the New Opportunities Fund to encourage community involvement and management of Local Nature Reserves. Ponds for People is a national community project run by the Ponds Conservation Trust.

Jenny Barr manages a number of Ponds for People projects across West Leeds, most of which are well supported. The Lower Spen LNR is a quality green space in an area of high traffic congestion and air pollution. It is working well as a nature reserve, but it suffers serious problems of vandalism, including dumping, arson, racist graffiti etc.

The local Youth Offending Team has been carrying out reparation work on site with small groups of young offenders. Benches which had been destroyed by fire have now been replaced, with wheelchair accessible bird hides. New pond scrapes are under construction. And in a innovative attempt to avoid vandalism, ' interpretation boards ' are being installed – on the council web site!

These improvements should help to make BME visitors to the site feel safer, but what else can be done to increase levels of engagement with the nature reserve?

Jenny works with local schools and did a bat box workshop recently.

- C of E Junior School 90% BME – 'at bursting point'. Headmaster Mr Lockwood. Works with a Neighbourhood Enrichment Officer appointed by the council to raise Asian parents' awareness of their children's education.
- White kids travel to the Catholic school in Dewsbury or Murfield. Grace Landscapes built a garden there last year and parents are asked to maintain it at six-monthly events.
- Boothroyd Primary School has an air pollution monitor in the playground and parents are very concerned about high rates of cancer in children.

Jenny also circulated a questionnaire to residents about their interest in nature conservation and got a good response, including a few Asian names.

She is working with freelance artist Adam Strickson (ex of Chol Theatre and Hadrian's Wall project) to develop a community arts project, aiming to acquaint people with nature and bring together people of different communities in a celebration of nature through art. A small EMAS grant (from BEN's Ethnic Minorities Award Scheme) was accepted in 2004 and an application for the majority of the funding was made to Yorkshire Arts Council.

Adam was interviewed and written about Travellers in York, and he is currently working on a cross-cultural drama project linking bilingual young people in Caernavon and Bradford.

Adam has observed that UK Asian communities often come from a farming background, but over here they have little or no contact with the land and the memory soon goes. He is asking why? People in Bradford have more time now and there is an increase in gardening and walking for health, especially among Bengali women. Community development initiatives tend to move quicker in some cities like Bradford and Leicester (perhaps Leeds is an exception) and take longer to establish in the towns and villages like Ravensthorpe. Also, Bangladeshi women use small spaces to grow food, but Pakistani women do not. We don't know why.

On 15th and 16th January 2005 Adam led a project, together with Loca, a local arts agency, and community development workers Fahat and Maria to create a 3m diameter 8 pointed Islamic star made entirely from natural materials: bullrushes, rosehips, moss, holly, bindweed and giant hogweed all suspended on a willow frame. The sculpture took more than 3 days to build and involved over 20 volunteers. Gold clay stars and red ribbon were used for the finishing touches. Once complete the star was photographed and the image used to produce Eid and Christmas cards.

A similar event is being planned to take place with school children on 30th and 31st March.