

1996
2006

Better Places
Case study 2: Chinbrook Meadows



a better place
to play

Where

Chinbrook Meadows, Lewisham,
South London

What

We helped open up and restore a river, making an urban park a more natural and welcoming place. New sports facilities, pavilion and an outdoor learning area complete the improvements.

Findings

- Chinbrook Meadows has been a park since the late 1930s and is one of 44 in the Borough of Lewisham. Through it flows the River Quaggy, which joins the Thames at Deptford.
- Our recent survey found that four out of five park users walk to Chinbrook Meadows and that a majority visit once a week or more.
- 89% of people thought restoring the river has improved the park—many thought that it now looked more attractive.
- Three quarters of local residents think more people use the park now —particularly families and young people.
- Significantly, 20% of the people who helped with the survey said they now felt safer when they visit the park.
- 56% of park users found that the improvements had reduced graffiti and littering as well as making the park a safer place to spend time.

a better place to play

Chinbrook Meadows has been a park since the late 1930s and is one of 44 in the Borough of Lewisham. Through it flows the River Quaggy, which joins the Thames at Deptford.

Lewisham is one of London's more deprived areas. Measured against a range of indicators like unemployment, income, health and housing it rates as one of the city's poorest boroughs.

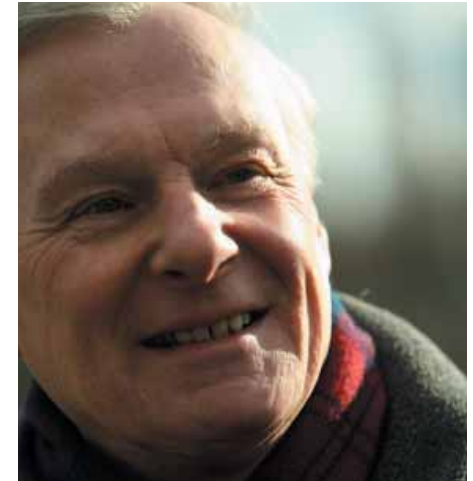
Some Lewisham wards suffer particularly high levels of deprivation and areas close to Chinbrook Meadows fall into the 10% most deprived in England.

The last Census showed that more than a quarter of Lewisham families with children have no adult in work while more than a third are headed by a lone parent. The borough's residents rely on local parks for relaxation and enjoyment.

Until recently Chinbrook Meadows was an open space that was underused by its community. That was partly due to its layout—the river crossed Chinbrook Meadows in an ugly concrete channel that was screened by a dense, evergreen hedge. This 'barrier' cut the park in two.

The park was a magnet for anti-social behaviour and local people felt unsafe when they were using it.

We went back to Chinbrook Meadows in 2005 to find out how local people have benefited from the improvements. You can find our full report at www.environment-agency.gov.uk



“It was run down, uninviting, and people felt they couldn’t walk in it because they might be attacked.”

Barrie Anderson
Councillor, Grove Park Ward, Lewisham



What did we do?

The idea that the Quaggy should be freed from its ‘captive’ at Chinbrook was first tabled a decade ago by a community organisation, the Quaggy Waterways Action Group (QWAG). The group’s Operation Kingfisher recommended a series of restoration projects along the Quaggy, including returning Chinbrook Meadows to something closer to nature.

In 2002, we worked with local groups to restore the river. Local people liked the proposals and a user group was formed to represent the community throughout the process.

The concrete channel and hedge were removed and a natural-looking river created, which meandered through a wildflower meadow. A new bridge and boardwalk were also built.

At the same time new lighting was put in along with improved sport facilities. The park gates are now more secure and wardens are on duty throughout the day.

Who did we work with?

We worked closely with the London Borough of Lewisham, its parks contractor Glendale Grounds Management and Groundwork to improve Chinbrook Meadows. Local people played an important role too, especially through the Quaggy Waterways Action Group and the Friends of Chinbrook Meadows.

What is it like now?

Chinbrook Meadows is now a very different place. The old Chinbrook Meadows had a traditional municipal park look. Since work was completed in 2002 that has been replaced by a far more natural and informal landscape, with an open, parkland feel.

The Quaggy’s water quality is good, so wild birds and animals quickly moved in. Dragonflies can be seen in summer, and sticklebacks thrive in the Quaggy’s pools and shallows. Herons come to the park to hunt, as do kingfishers.

What do people think?

The park’s makeover has had an impact on the lives of the people who use it and who live near to it. **Our recent survey found that four out of five park users walk to Chinbrook Meadows and that a majority visit once a week or more.**

Our survey also revealed that **89% of people thought restoring the river has improved the park – many thought that it now looked more attractive.** People visit to walk, to exercise their dog, to use the sport facilities and to look at the river and watch wildlife.

“London is a concrete jungle and places like this are like your lungs of London... it’s your own little countryside.”

Roy Palmer
local resident



“You see more children and families since it’s opened up, since more care has been taken.”

Rita Barnes
Friends of Chinbrook Meadows



Three quarters of local residents think more people use the park now – particularly families and young people. Nearly 40% of people now stay longer when they visit. One resident said “More people come and stay around the area than walk through.” Youngsters now flock to the park to play sports. “I use it more now that it’s done up,” says Martin Wilkins. “We use the football pitches over there. It’s just nicer to come really.”

The project also created an outdoor classroom, art works and a pond dipping area for children.

Significantly, 20% of the people who helped with the survey said they now felt safer when they visit the park. Fear of crime is very much an issue in the borough. A study for Lewisham’s crime reduction and community safety strategy found that residents felt their area had become less safe in recent years, with women being most concerned.

Our survey revealed that 56% of park users found that the improvements had reduced graffiti and littering as well as making the park a safer place to spend time. That sense of greater security is largely due to better lighting and the presence of a warden, but people did say the opening up of the park’s layout also played its part.

As local resident Tim Noble puts it, “A long, long time ago they used to have a problem with glue sniffers. They went away in the mid-80s and then all of a sudden we’ve got the car drivers coming along and burning cars out. Now we’ve got the big new gates you just don’t see them. It’s a lot, lot better. I can’t remember the last time I saw a burnt out car.”

What happens next?

The successful river restoration at Chinbrook Meadows has become something of a showcase. There are now plans for similar work elsewhere along the Quaggy, from its source down to Deptford Creek, where it joins the Thames.

“We have this dream that the Quaggy can be something that brings natural beauty into the lives of ordinary people. It has been really inspiring for people to come and see what we’re talking about.”

Matthew Blumler
Quaggy Waterways Action Group

“Before the work you would either come to this park to give the dog a walk or maybe to have a kick around, but not really to sit and to take in the local environment. Now people do that...”

David Webb
Principal Ecologist,
Environment Agency

Better places tells the story of how we work with others to improve deprived communities and what this work means for local people.

For more information, see the following

Environment Agency publications:

Enhancing the environment: 20 case studies in London;
River Restoration: A Stepping Stone to Urban Regeneration;
Bringing your rivers back to life: A strategy for restoring rivers in North London.



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