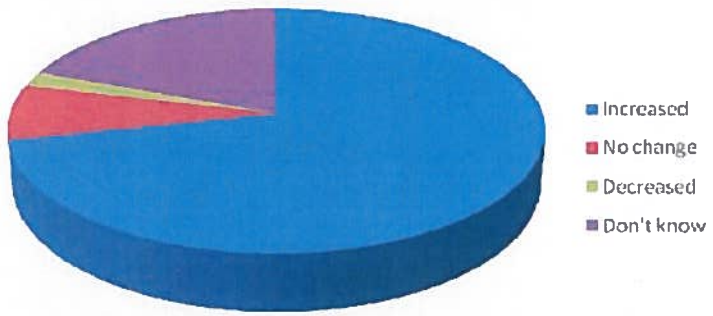
Following completion

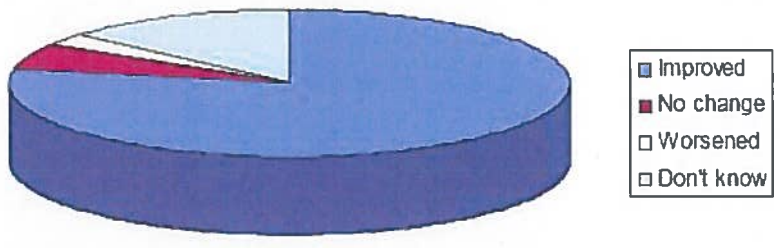
"Whilst chilling out in Ladywell Fields for 3 or 4 hours yesterday afternoon with a cuppa from the cafe, Cynthia reading a book, Daisy paddling in the River (with lots of other kids), it occurred to me, not for the first time, how fantastically Ladywell Fields is becoming what we hoped, a few years back, it might become."

Park User Group secretary

Perceptions of the use & enjoyment of Ladywell Fields and the River Ravensbourne



Has the QUERCUS project improved habitats in Ladywell Fields?



As part of the EU Life funding for the northern field a series of baseline information was gathered prior to commencing the design and this was then repeated following completion. These were aimed at responding to the QUERCUS three main aims:

- To increase use and enjoyment of Ladywell Fields and the Ravensbourne River corridor
- To reduce crime and fear of crime
- To improve habitats for wildlife

The achievement of each aim was examined in turn and documented within a report. A summary of findings are represented on this page. The information relies on data collected over July in 2006 and 2008.

Perception of change

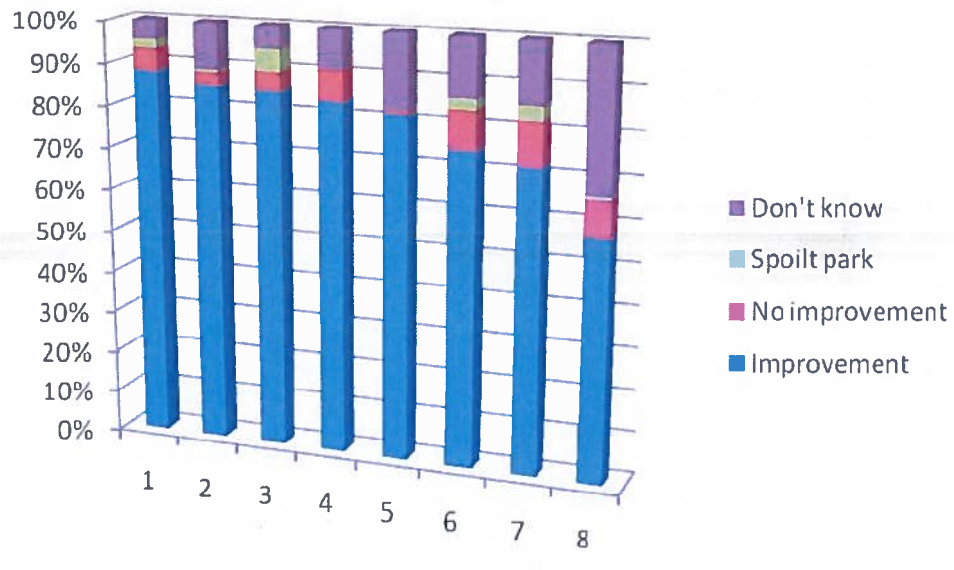
The changes made have been well received by park users and local people. The bar chart below shows how survey respondents rated the major physical changes carried out to the park through the QUERCUS project 2006-2008.

1 General landscape changes
2 Opening up the nature reserve to become part of the park, accessible to all
3 New river channel
4 New path to the station
5 New entrance, renewed use and renovation of the education centre
6 Removal and planting of trees
7 Removal of railings along the existing river channel
8 Renovation of St Mary's Garden

The most popular change is to the general landscape – 88% of respondents think the QUERCUS project has improved the landscape, and over 85% agree that creating the new river channel has improved the park. Even the removal of railings and trees – opposed by some when the project sought planning permission - has been welcomed by over 70% of respondents.

Volunteers helping out in Ladywell to remove some old fencing

School children learning about the wildlife found in Ladywell Fields



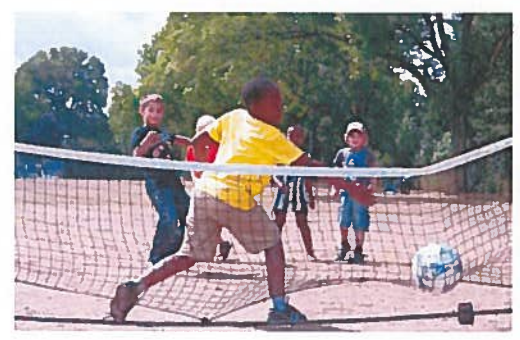
Park Usage

To provide a snapshot of total park usage, the park keeper carries out a head-count of people in the park at around 2pm each day. Data from July 2005 was used to create the baseline from which QUERCUS worked. This is compared with data from July 2008 on the graphs below:

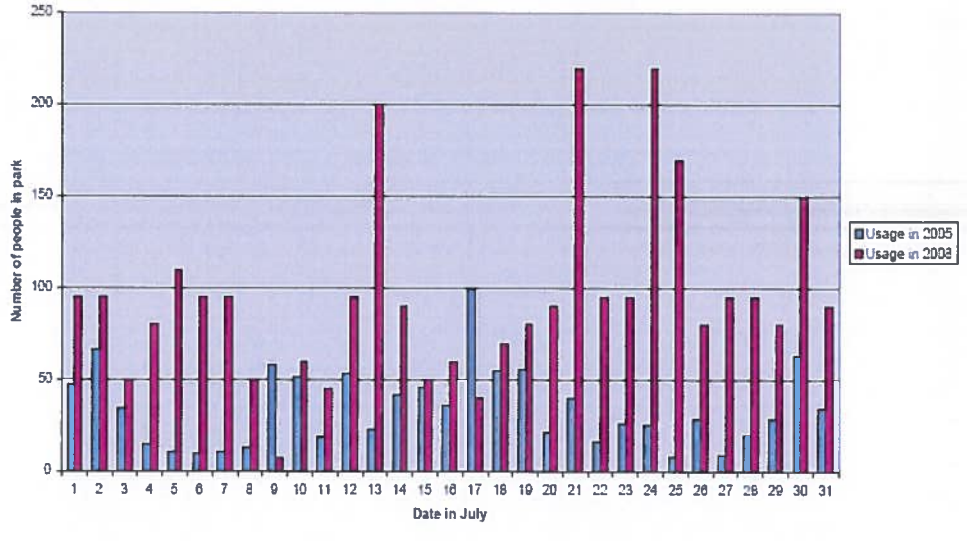
The graph above show a dramatic increase in park usage since the completion of the QUERCUS works. In 2005, the average number of people in the park at the time of the headcount was 34. The average number of people in the park in 2008 however, throughout July, was 94 – a 276% increase on 2005!

This two and a half fold increase in usage exceeds the aims and expectations with which the QUERCUS project set out.

Previously the children's playground was the major draw of the park - almost half of park users normally used the playground during their visit in 2006. By summer 2008 this had fallen to 21%. Prior to the project, the playground was one of the few facilities in the park, now the river and landscape itself provides enjoyment and amusement. As a result, while many children and families still use the park, the river, its banks and pools provide a natural environment for explorative play and have become more popular than the artificial environment of the playground.



Bar chart to compare park usage in 2005 and 2008



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Changes in perception of the park

The survey of park users revealed a clear perception that the general facilities in the park have improved through the QUERCUS project. People now rate park facilities (benches and bins, the cafe, facilities for children, paths and maintenance and sports facilities) considerably more highly than they did before the works took place, as the bar chart below demonstrates.

Interestingly survey respondents felt the sports facilities were better in 2008 than in 2006, although within that timeframe the only substantial changes to sports facilities in the park were the removal of a tennis court and football pitch! It seems that the success of QUERCUS has engendered a positive feeling towards the park such that even facilities which have not been enhanced through the project are now regarded with greater satisfaction than they were two years ago.

Whilst most park users feel the facilities in the park have improved, nevertheless, there remain some concerns about using the open space. For the vast majority of people these issues do not create insurmountable barriers, but they may tinge the enjoyment of their visits. On the whole the number of survey respondents rating issues of concern has decreased significantly as the bar chart below (figure 6) illustrates. There are just three areas in which levels of concern have escalated during the lifetime of QUERCUS. The first is concern about dogs – particularly those not on a lead. This is likely to be as a result of the increase in number of people in London owning dogs which are perceived to be aggressive or threatening. Given that 22% of survey respondents were concerned about this issue, consideration is being given to establishing a 'dogs on leads' policy in this part of the park, enforced by the park keeper.

The other two issues of increasing concern to park users are related to perceptions of safety – park users increasingly feel that the space is too enclosed, and that the visibility of paths is poor. This is despite the efforts made by QUERCUS to design out crime from the park. Interestingly, the re-landscaping, the tree pruning and removal in Ladywell Fields have opened up views to and from the road, making the space less enclosed, and on pre-existing paths visibility has only been enhanced. However, it may be that survey respondents are thinking of the new paths in the wildlife area where sensitivity to the natural environment has led to designing less clear sight lines than in other parts of the park.

Reducing crime and fear of crime

At the beginning of the project, the QUERCUS partnership employed Groundwork SE London to research criminal activity and fear of crime within the three urban river corridors. They developed a model which all three partners could employ to make their river corridors safer.

Essentially three approaches were recommended:

Firstly, and most crucially, Groundwork recommended creating self-policing space. To achieve this the open space needs to be busy, and sight lines clear. In such spaces park users look out for each other, and any potential perpetrator is prevented from carrying out criminal activity as too many pairs of eyes are watching. The space should be well maintained, as neglect generates fear of crime, and may indicate to potential perpetrators that criminal acts will be tolerated.

Secondly, Groundwork recommended protecting the potential victim, by removing potential hiding places, providing formal surveillance and creating alternative routes so a victim has easy means of escape.

Thirdly, Groundwork recommended that in some specific areas, limiting access to parts of a linear open space could make it safer, by excluding potential perpetrators from areas which are difficult to enliven.

The QUERCUS project in Lewisham has sought to implement this model in Ladywell Fields. Groundwork identified particular issues within the site which could encourage criminal activity. These are listed below, together with the solutions implemented to overcome these problems.

Survey results show the changes have been effective. Despite the dramatically increased usage of the park, the number of crimes reported in the park has remained constant, and people feel significantly safer. Prior to the project, only 44% people felt safe or very safe in the park; following the improvements this has risen to 78%.

Species diversity

In the species survey carried out by the GLA in 2005 areas containing large amounts of amenity grassland were less biodiverse than other habitat types such as running water and semi-improved grass land.

Amenity grassland has been significantly reduced in the project area and replaced with semi-improved grassland, running water, ephemeral pools and dead wood. This has had a positive effect on the number of species found in the northern field of Ladywell Fields.

The survey of park users carried out since the QUERCUS project shows that local people recognise and appreciate these changes, as the pie chart below illustrates:

The QUERCUS team are also delighted to see the dramatic increase in the number of different species already using these habitats, as revealed by the survey. As good management of the site continues, and the habitats mature and establish further, additional biodiversity gains are expected.

The former nature reserve in the northern field was not part of the park, but a small area of dense scrubland between the park and the station, only accessible to a few key holders. It was not managed well, and as such was not an effective haven for wildlife. In the species survey carried out prior to the project in this part of the park, only 24 different species of flora and fauna were found. The fences were removed by local volunteers, ground re-graded with spoil from the river channel (all of which was used within the project site) and a gravel path was established to the former station ticket office, now used as an environmental education centre. Different habitat areas have now been established through the work of a group of regular volunteers - including coppiced woodland, deadwood habitat, a pond, and woodland meadow. The next project is to lay the mixed hedgerow. Already the number of different species recorded in the area has increased to 79.

These improvements in habitats and biodiversity are particularly encouraging in an inner city park. The changes show that it is possible to create a haven, not only for people, but also for wildlife, in a relatively small green space within an urban environment.