GROUNDWORK REPORT

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Riverside Gardens Stage - 1 Co-Design and Engagement Report

July 2019

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1. Background and Purpose

In 2018 the London Borough of Bexley was successful in their bid for £1.6m from the Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund. The funding was awarded to a series of projects which will continue the ongoing regeneration programme in Erith. The programme seeks to provide support and opportunities for new businesses, uplift and rejuvenate the public realm in the town, bring people closer to the river and renovate the Riverside Gardens, a park in the town centre.

LB Bexley commissioned Groundwork London to engage with the community in and around Erith to produce a design brief and a concept design for the renovation of the Riverside Gardens. This report summarise the first stage of the co-design and engagement process and presents the design options for the gardens.

2. Objectives of the Co-Design and Engagement Process

As part of the commission the following objectives were included;

- Plan, organise and lead a programme of community engagement
- Formulate a picture of what the gardens are currently used for and what the community would like them to be used for
- Liaise with key Council stakeholders to agree scope of project, existing known constraints and the key outcomes and objectives for the project.
- Create a map/directory of key stakeholders and community groups in the area and an engagement plan.
- Formulate a list of key features of the Gardens to help inform the design
- Using the engagement process, develop a concept design to form part of the brief for landscape architects

3. Engagement Outputs

A programme of engagement and an agreed approach was developed by Groundwork London and the LB Bexley to engage a range of stakeholders including the general public, existing community groups and stakeholders, residents of nearby housing association properties and local parents and children. Details of the different engagement activities and the number of people engaged are summarised in the below table.

Date	Activity	Audience Engaged	Format
22/04/2019	Communications and Promotion	General Public	Web page containing project information & dates of consultation activities. Posters to advertise 2 pop-up events, questionnaire, and email contact. Direct liaison with community groups.
22/04/2019	Questionnaire Survey	General Public – 194 respondents	Online and in-person surveys
25/04/2019	Greater Erith Open Day 1/2	General Public – 23 people engaged	Pop-up Stall with image boards; qualitative and quantitative data collected
27/04/2019	Greater Erith Open Day 2/2	General Public – 20 people engaged	Pop-up Stall with image boards; qualitative and quantitative data collected
22/05/2019	Council Officer Workshop	Council Officers – 14 people engaged	Round table discussion on opportunities and limitations
30/05/2019	Ideas Forum 1/2	Community Groups and Stakeholders – 7 people engaged	Round table discussions and questions on emerging themes
14/06/2019	Erith Kitchen Pop Up 1/2	General Public – 37 people engaged	Pop-up; Qualitative and quantitative data collected
22/06/2019	Ideas Forum 1/2	Community Groups and Stakeholders – 11 people engaged	Round table discussions and questions on emerging themes
12/07/2019	Erith Kitchen Pop Up 2/2	General Public – 31 people engaged	Pop-up; Qualitative and quantitative data collected
20/07/2019	West Street Event	Residents of West Street Estate/Orbit Housing – 12 people engaged	Event to engage the residents of West Street

24/07/2019	Play & Stay Picnic 1/2	Parents and Children - 12	Event to engage local parents and children in the park
26/07/2019	Play & Stay Picnic 1/2	Parents and Children - 0	Event to engage local parents and children in the park
		Total Number of People Engaged - 361	

Stakeholder Engagement and Communications

The first stage of the co-design and engagement process was carried out between April and July 2019. We successfully engaged a wide cross section of residents/ stakeholders. We engaged 16 stakeholder groups including the Friends of Riverside Gardens, The Exchange, Erith Think Tank and Erith Town Forum via meetings, ideas forum sessions and via e-mail and telephone to ensure they felt part of the consultation process from the outset. Below is a more detailed analysis of the stakeholders we engaged and how we engaged them.

Stakeholder	Letter	Survey	Email	Pop Up	Ideas Forum	1 to 1 Meeting
The Exchange		☑	☑		☑	
North Kent Countryside Partnership		☑	☑			
Erith Town Forum		☑	☑	☑	☑	
Erith Rotary Club		☑	☑		☑	
FORGE		☑	☑		☑	☑
Hyde		☑	☑			
L&Q		☑	☑		☑	
Orbit		☑	☑	☑		☑
Erith Think Tank		☑	☑		☑	
The Yacht Club			☑		☑	
Erith WI		☑	☑			
Erith Local History Group		☑	☑			
Bexley Natural Environment Forum			☑		☑	
Running Horses Pub	☑					
Erith Playhouse		☑	☑	☑		
College			☑			
Rowing Club			☑			
CCC Erith			☑			
Christchurch			☑			

| Queen Street Baptist Church | ☑ | |
| Safer Neighbourhoods Team | ☑ | ☑ |

Communications

Throughout the first stage we have been using a mixed comms approach to different stakeholders, this has included direct communications such as emails and phone calls as well as leaflets, posters, business cards, project signs, e-invites, updated website and regular social media posts. Below is an example of some of the communications we have produced.

Figures 2 -3 Examples of Project Comms
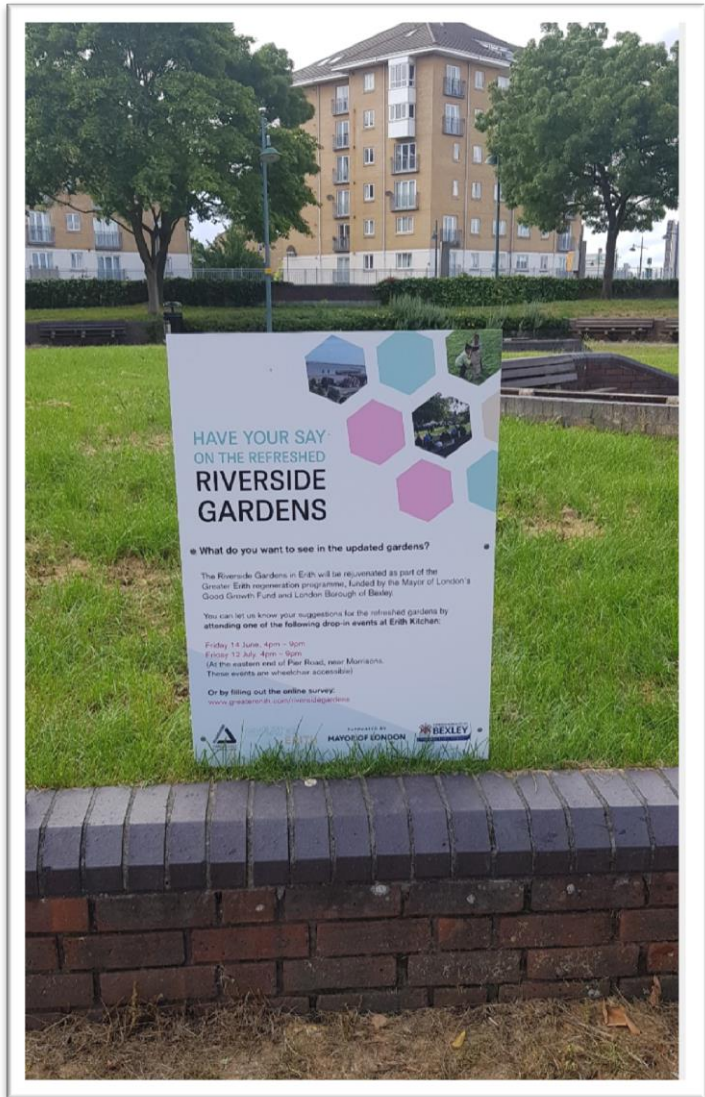
Figures 1 -3 Examples of Project Comms

Figures 3 -3 Examples of Project Comms

4. Themes and Highlights from the Co-Design and Engagement Process

Key emerging themes: Connection to the riverside frontage, play provision, history and heritage, destination and identity

These 4 themes came up very early in the consultation and the focus grew clearer as the process continued.

Connection to the riverside frontage – The parks riverside location and its connection to the river came up in every engagement we undertook; the location of the park by the river is clearly seen as an asset that isn't being capitalised on. It was highlighted as an opportunity in the council officers' workshops with officers commenting that it is "Unique in Bexley for its river frontage" and "More should be done to improve views of the river from the park"

Through the survey respondents were asked what their improvement priority for the park is, out of a range of different options; 22% of respondents said that improving the river frontage would be their priority ranking this as the second most popular improvement priority.

As a result of this emerging theme we proposed asking a specific question to the stakeholder groups at one of the Ideas Forum. Stakeholders were asked "How can we make the river and park more connected and make the most of the riverside position?" Some of the response have been summarised in the below table.

Comments from Ideas Forum - "How can we make the river and park more connected and make the most of the riverside position?"
"Curving footpaths leading to wall or platform, mimicking bends in the river."   *"Improved Viewing platform, current platform feels exposed"*   *"Different levels across park, slope loving plants, step free for river views."*   *"Improve signage to river/viewing platform"*   *"Have the gardens viewable from the river walk"*   *"Current platform feels exposed needs shelter with a view"*

Any improvements or new feature proposed to address this theme will have to take into consideration the existing flood defence wall which has to remain in tact. The wall is managed by the Environment Agency and is earmarked for being increased in height by 2050.

Play provision – Creating opportunities for play frequently came up during the co-design process, these ranged from providing formal or more traditional play opportunities to creating more imaginative, natural play and playable landscape opportunities. Currently only 7.4% of the survey respondents stated they used the gardens for play however 18.4% of respondents stated their improvement priority would be for play, this rated play as the third highest improvement priority behind improving the river frontage and improving the park facilities.

Comments from Ideas Forum & Pop Ups – How can we encourage more young people to use the Gardens? What different kinds of play can we introduce?

"Giant games – chess, snakes and ladders, jenga"
"Small play park for children this may have maintenance cost problems"
"Area for picnics and sunbathing"
"Wooden ship designed on the 'Great Harry' ship to tie in with local history"
"Play area for imaginary games"
"Summer activities for young people"
"Removing barriers for activities"
"Children's individual play items around the park"
"Engage with local providers of youth activities to use the park, The Exchange, Scouts, Cadets."
"Zebra crossing or lights to create safe crossing for children on the main road"
"Designated child friendly area, separate fenced dog friendly area"
"Climbing rocks – play area in Belvedere has a good example, although susceptible to graffiti"
"Wooden beams – inspired by Howletts Zoo"
"Need for children's play, but not to large. Consider natural play opportunities. Consider age range"

Encouraging play has both opportunities and limitations associated with it. Opportunities that have been highlighted through the idea forums are summarised in the adjacent table and broadly fall into three over-arching categories;

1. Providing physical play opportunities in the form of equipment or facilities.
2. Promoting the gardens as a place for play activities and remove barriers that currently restrict this.
3. Create a safer environment for play.

Limitations that restrict the forms of play and potential associated improvements include, constraints on maintenance budgets, and restrictions to the level of enforcement that the council can provide to deal with issues such as ASB and dog fouling.

History and heritage – During the engagement process we heard from many of the established stakeholder groups about Erith's' local history and heritage. The gardens have historical links with a naval dockyard built during the reign of Henry VIII, this dockyard was where the Kings' flagship Henry Grace à Dieu or the "Great Harry" was fitted out in 1515. Furthermore the area of Riverside Gardens is the location where Alexander Selkirk first returned to England in 1711; Selkirk was the inspiration for the novel Robinson Crusoe. There is also more recent industrial heritage which has connections to how the gardens came in to being. Some of the comments received through the online survey and the ideas forums are summarised in the adjacent table.

Comments from Ideas Forum and Online Survey

"Reflect on the history in planting scheme"
"Festival of history and river"
"Timeline of Erith history in park"
"Erith through the ages on the flood wall"
"Display ship for children interact with"
"Metal heritage plaque of the river"

While established stakeholders were keen to discuss the gardens' heritage and history as one of its' features, this did not come through with other local residents. When asked in the online survey local residents ranked the response 'improving the park for history and heritage' as last in their priorities for improvements. The current history and heritage features within the gardens are

signage and markers relating to Alexander Selkirk, an Erith Heritage Town Walk and the donation of land by William Cory.

Figure 4 - 6 Examples of Current History and Heritage Signage

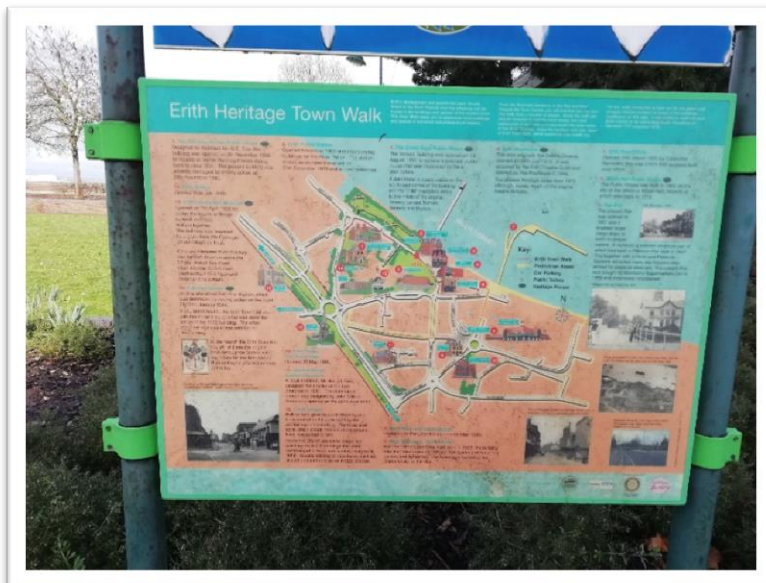Figure 4 - 6 Examples of Current History and Heritage Signage

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Destination and identity – Currently the gardens are underused by local residents despite it being Erith's only significant green space. To identify the extent of the underuse and reasons that could be behind this we ask several questions on the parks current usage and what prevents people from using it.

When asked "How often do you visit Riverside Gardens?" the majority of survey respondents said they visit the park "less than once a month". In addition to the survey data council officers conducted people counts in the garden on three separate occasions, showed an average footfall of 20 people an hour entering the park.

Those that did visit the garden were asked what they did during there visit, 89.8% or respondents said that they "Just walked through".

Following on from this survey respondents were asked "What stops you from using Riverside Gardens more?" 60.7% of respondents said the lack of facilities such as toilets, café or kiosk stop

them for using the park more, there were also five additional comments from survey respondents regarding the provision of either toilets, café or a kiosk. The second highest reason why people didn't use the gardens more often was lack of activities in the gardens. Following on from this the third highest reason given by respondents to "What stops you from using Riverside Gardens more?" was "Other", respondents were ask to elaborate and a total of 64 respondent left comments, these answers are summarised in the table below.

"What stops you from using Riverside Gardens more?" Comments left by people who answered other.	
General upkeep and attractiveness of the park	35
ASB/crime/safety concerns	14
Lack of play facilities	5
Lack of a café/toilets/kiosks	5
Presence of litter/dog mess	3
Lack of events and activities	1
Access issues	1

When community stakeholders were asked "What new facilities would benefit local people and help draw more people to the park" they responded in a variety of ways examples of these response can be found in the adjacent table, the majority of comments concerned putting on more events and activities in the park.

Comment from idea forum when asked "What new facilities would benefit local people and help draw more people to the park"
Put on events for members of the community
Outdoor cinema – Big screen for sports and other events x2 open university x2 – end of year show
New community space in the gardens
Small scale artwork
New views of river
Toilets
Free things to do
Playground
Local flower show
Fun, creative, intervention i.e. funny shaped benches

Other highlights from the community engagement

Safety – While safety or fear of crime didn't come out as one of the top response as why people didn't use the garden we did receive a number of comments relating to safety and crime. These

comments mostly focused on the perception or prevalence of drug crime and street drinking in the park.

Access & mobility – A number of comments were also received about access and mobility around the park, these include the quality of the existing paths being unsuitable for prams and wheelchairs, no step free access to the current viewing platform and the entry points for parks being far away from the closest disabled parking bay.

Negative reactions to a potential café – Although the survey results show there is strong local support for a café in the park there was a negative reaction to this from a small number of the stakeholder groups.

General positive reception and lack of apathy – While we only have anecdotal evidence of this but when engaged the majority of stakeholders and local resident were positive towards the London Borough of Bexley investing in the gardens and showed little in the way of apathy towards potential changes and improvements to the gardens. This is often rare in projects of this nature.

5. Demographic analysis

To ensure we were collecting input from different demographic and that we were reaching a wide range of local people we asked respondents to the survey to answer the following three questions;

What is your gender?
What is your age?
Please describe your ethnicity?
What is the postcode of your current address?

Gender

We had an even mix of genders with a slight bias towards females, 59% of respondents identified themselves as female, 39% as male and 1% as other/prefer not to say.

Age

The age of respondents was very mixed but with a trend towards those who were over 30. The breakdown of the different age ranges is represented in the table below. Of the age ranges over 30 the spread of respondents is evenly balanced.

Age	Percentage of Respondents
17 or younger	1.75%
18 - 20	0.58%
21 - 29	9.94%
30 - 39	22.22%
40 - 49	26.90%
50 – 59	16.37%
60 or older	22.22%

Ethnicity

We asked an open response question asking people to describe their ethnicity, a wide range of response were received. 12% of respondents identified themselves as BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) while 82% identified themselves as White British, White Irish, White European or similar and a further 6% didn't answer the question. According to the last census 18% of Bexley's population are BAME and 31% of the Erith's population are BAME.

Location

Riverside Gardens is located in the postcode DA8, the surrounding postcodes for the DA8 area are DA1, DA7, & DA17. From the respondents who submitted there postcode 77% were from the DA8 area, with the DA1, DA7 & DA17 postcodes making up 17% & other postcodes outside of the area making up 6% .

6. Recommendations

With the information gathered during stage 1 of the co-design and engagement we'd make the follow recommendations to inform the design brief being developed by London Borough of Bexley and to guide the second stage of engagement.

Recommendations for Second Stage of Engagement and Co-design
> During stage 2 of the co-design and engagement process some focused activities to engage young people, disability groups and BAME groups should be planned to address gaps in stage 1.
> There is an interest from community members to trial new events and activities in the park. The current engagement plan does have some provision for this but this could be prioritised in stage 2 so some new activity could take place before the park closes. Alongside this LB of Bexley are currently looking at reducing barriers for community

members who want to get be active in their community through their recently adopted Connected Communities Strategy.

> Host a community feedback event in September to present the findings of the 1st Stage of Co-design and Engagement.

Recommendations for the Design Brief

Connectivity and Access

> Improve visual connection on to river.
> Improve physical connectivity between river path and gardens provide step-free access and improve paths.
> Highlight and improve entrance and exit points to gardens.
> Consider improving pedestrian connections and crossing points leading to gardens from wider site context. LB of Bexley are currently investigating reshaping road configurations within Erith through there Erith Links project.
> Improvements to viewing platform.

Identity and Appearance

> Reference history and heritage of area through materials, planting and design.
> Planting – there is an opportunity to reference natural heritage of site and create ecological improvements. The gardens coastal microclimate should also be considered in any potential new planting schemes.
> Include robust site furniture to withstand coastal microclimate, also considering reflecting local identity and history.
> Better wayfinding and signage both within the gardens and to other local amenities and projects such as Pier Square.
> Maintain visual permeability and improve perceptions of site safety through working with community stakeholders and by adhering to safer by design principles.

Activities and Appearances

> Integrate opportunities for play into site especially natural and informal play.
> Improve access to toilet facilities.
> Improve food/drink facilities - if permanent facilities prove inappropriate, consider space for pop-ups or connections to nearby facilities.
> Create opportunities for events within space (festivals/events/popup space).
> Spaces for rest and viewing which allows for shelter whilst permitting visual permeability.