



WE RETHOUGHT PARKS

PARK HACK

Nesta...



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ABOUT THE RETHINKING PARKS PROGRAMME

Rethinking Parks was a joint Nesta, Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund England programme to find, support and test new approaches to raising income or reducing costs for public parks. Public parks face cuts of 60% and more from traditional local authority revenues over the next decade, and this programme trialled new methods and models to address this funding gap. Other resources from the Rethinking Parks programme, including descriptions of other models, the summary report and links to tools for the sector can be found at: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/rethinking-parks>

ABOUT PARK HACK

The Park Hack project, run by Groundwork London in partnership with the London Borough of Hackney, focused on four parks in Shoreditch, London. Shoreditch is an inner city commercial and residential district of east London. The project covered Hoxton Square, Hackney Road Recreational Ground, Mark Street Gardens and Charles Square.



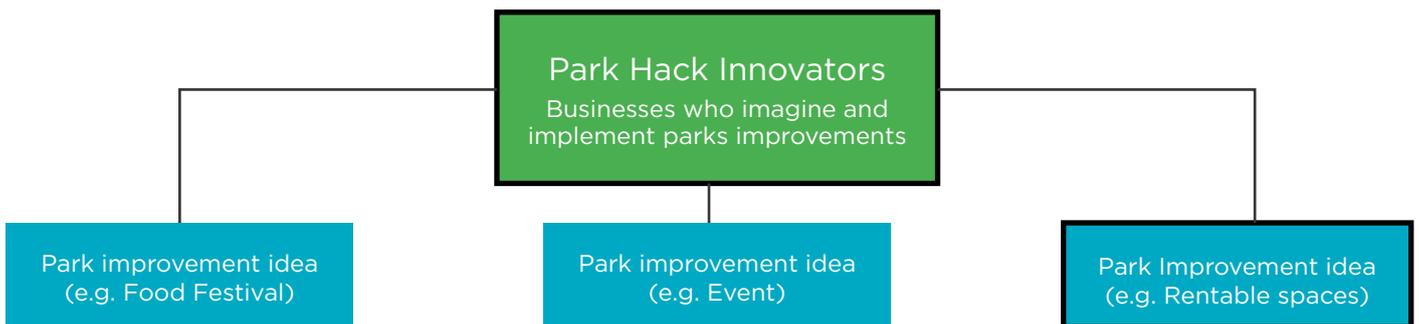
PARK HACK AT A GLANCE



Encouraging businesses to develop and implement parks improvements.

WHAT IS IT?

The Park Hack Innovators are a group of businesses who came together to develop and implement parks improvements. The ideas were worked up and implemented together with the local authority and a green space charity.



The Innovators’ first practical project was to build a meeting space for rent in Hoxton Square (the Tree X Office). Insights from the Tree X Office are also presented below.

WHAT’S THE POTENTIAL IMPACT?

The financial impact from a Park Hack Innovators approach will vary according to the ideas pursued. Based on 50% occupancy, the Tree X Office was projected to make £20k per annum, but this idea was specific to local market conditions and rents.

CORE CHARACTERISTICS



QUICK TO DELIVER



BUSINESS
ENGAGEMENT



A HELPFUL
CONTRIBUTION TO
SOME PARKS.

WHERE MIGHT FUNDING MIGHT COME FROM?

- Businesses involved (as sponsors / contributors, or through in kind support to implement ideas)
- The local authority or other parks managing agent (who support coordination, meeting space etc in order to stimulate fresh ideas and improvements in parks)
- Local enterprise partnerships or other business organisations
- Income from rental of services offered (e.g. workspace)
- Business led community events (such as food festivals)

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR DELIVERY?

- Innovative or creative businesses near parks
- Strong existing networks to reach businesses
- Endorsement or support from the community and local authority
- Strong business engagement and planning skills
- Good stakeholder management skills

For structures such as the Tree X Office

- Good understanding of demand for space to rent
- Good access to site and amenities
- Planning permission (unless within permitted development)
- Suitable architects, designers and builders
- Property manager with strong business skills

HOW LONG MIGHT IT TAKE?

A group of innovators can be established within a few months. Time to see a return will depend on the ideas that the group pursues. Shared, pop-up or rentable meeting spaces take three to nine months to develop and construct (dependent on the size, complexity and permissions needed).

PARK HACK

WHAT THE TEAM DID

WHAT WAS THE TEAM'S ORIGINAL IDEA?

The Park Hack team initially comprised of:

- Groundwork London
- London Borough of Hackney
- Gensler

In addition, the Tree X Office partners were:

- Arts Admin
- Tate Harmer (architects)
- Natalie Jeremijenko (artist)
- Shuster Mosley (artists)
- Atom Build

The team secured in-kind corporate donations from Thornton Tomasetti, Taiyo Birdair and Solvay Surface Matter.

WHAT DID THE TEAM DO?

1. Groundwork London, Hackney Council and Gensler formed a partnership to explore a stronger connection between businesses in Shoreditch and their local green space.
2. Gensler completed an analysis of the four parks and identified opportunities for improvements and new uses. This process helped frame conversations with businesses and the community.
3. The partners constructed a large cube in each of the four sites, that people could write or draw on, to provoke responses from the public about how these spaces could be better used.



The cubes were good for raising interest and demonstrating that something was happening, They started conversations and encouraged people to get in touch, but not for generating meaningful ideas, as there was no chance for interaction.



Danielle Johnson, Groundwork London

4. An evening event for local businesses was held in an old art gallery adjacent to Hoxton Square. The deconstructed cubes were used as prompts for discussion, together with Gensler's parks analysis. Attendees suggested three areas of interest with potential to raise parks' funds: rentable workspaces, events and food ventures.
5. Groundwork London attended a business breakfast meeting with Hackney's town centre manager. As a result, the 'Park Hack Innovators' group was formed; a forum where businesses discuss ideas for park improvements and investment opportunities. Groundwork coordinated the monthly meetings and used the partners' wider networks to market the meetings. Any interested people or businesses could attend.
6. The Tree X Office was the first physical output from the Park Hack Innovators group. Gensler had previously identified high demand for meeting space in the area, and suggested a temporary structure could be an option. Gensler ran a workshop to explore people's preferences and core requirements for a structure. Groundwork London used existing outdoor spaces to collect feedback and insights. The team learnt that power, wifi access and heating were important design requirements.
7. A design team was formed, consisting of artists (a local charity, Arts Admin, expressed interest in contributing to the project), architects, builders and project managers. The team developed an attractive prototype for Hoxton Square. A design brief was drawn up and architectural plans shown to stakeholders.



8. The design and build team secured materials from sponsors, and constructed the Tree X Office to coincide with the London Festival of Architecture and the 2 Degrees arts festival.
9. Groundwork London developed a simple electronic booking system for the office, offering choices of whole of space, or individual place bookings on a half day basis. The team trialled different prices and time slots to understand the impact on bookings.
10. The Park Hack Innovators also ran a food event in Hoxton Square, 'The Hackney Village Fete', to connect businesses with the local community.

WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT NEXT?

A total of £22,396 was raised by the Park Hack project - £1,930 from office rentals, £2,600 from the Hackney Village Fete, £1750 from Corporate Volunteering, £8116 in material donations and £8,000 successful funding bid to supermarket for improvements. However, overall the income was outweighed by the cost of maintaining the office.

The Park Hack Innovators group was a success. The group mostly comprised start-up businesses with an interest in the area, and a willingness to contribute ideas. Architects and design agencies were keen to share ideas for innovative green space design, but organisations involved did not always have access to funding for ideas to be implemented. In addition to the Tree X Office, the Park Hack Innovators organised a food festival which will become a regular fixture in the area with profits donated back to parks. They also developed ideas for a produce market in Hackney Road Recreation Ground. The Park Hack Innovators will continue in 2016, coordinated by London Borough of Hackney. The intent is to widen the scope of the group to include larger businesses who may be able to sponsor improvements as well as creatively contribute.

The Tree X Office had incredible press attention, with relatively high occupancy in the first two months, although this fell off sharply in the winter. There was a high level of break-ins and damage, and the costs of repairs was more than the income from bookings. As a result of these problems, the Tree X Office was dismantled in December 2015. Armed with knowledge that a robust design is essential and longer term leases are more secure and preferable, London Borough of Hackney are exploring how existing buildings in another park could be used, and principles applied.



INDICATIVE FINANCIAL FORECAST: PARK HACK - RETHINKING PARKS FINANCIAL PLAN

(Indicative projections for Tree X Office, base on block bookings)

The project team initially forecast 20k per year as income from bookings, however the price point needed to be reduced, a more realistic forecast is below. This is based on block bookings (e.g monthly booking fee of £900, rather than hourly fees previously tried by the team). This forecast has not been tried and tested but is based on the learning from the project. It shows the costs outweigh the income without sponsorship.

Block Bookings	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
INDICATIVE INCOME						
Block Bookings		£ 11,550	£ 11,550	£ 11,550	£ 11,550	£ 11,550
Event Receipts		£ 1,500	£ 2,250	£ 2,475	£ 2,723	£ 2,995
Tree Office sponsorship	£ 60,000					
Other in kind contributions	£ 13,116					
TOTAL INCOME	£ 73,116	£ 13,050	£ 13,800	£ 14,025	£ 14,273	£ 14,545
INDICATIVE EXPENSES						
Construction	£ 38,483					
Other Start-up costs	£ 5,000					
Provision for take-down	£ 2,000					
<i>Programme mgmt</i>						
Business Community	£ 2,600	£ 2,400	£ 2,400	£ 2,400	£ 2,400	£ 2,400
Tree Office	£ 23,400	£ 600	£ 600	£ 600	£ 600	£ 600
Events	£ 1,500					
Block Bookings Costs Online booking system, electricity and services, maintenance.		£ 1,800	£ 1,800	£ 1,800	£ 1,800	£ 1,800
Staff mgmt		£ 1,650	£ 1,650	£ 1,650	£ 1,650	£ 1,650
Agent fees		£ 990	£ 990	£ 990	£ 990	£ 990
Annual cleaning		£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000	£ 1,000
TOTAL EXPENSES	£ 72,983	£ 8,440				
Projected Net results	-£ 29,866	£ 3,110	£ 3,860	£ 4,085	£ 4,333	£ 4,605
Net results, tree office only	-£ 25,766	£ 4,010	£ 4,010	£ 4,010	£ 4,010	£ 4,010
Total, start-up	£ 38,883					





TESTING THE MARKET: PARK HACK'S EXPERIENCE OF THE TREE X OFFICE

Engaging local businesses in conversations about Hackney's green spaces was a new experience for Hackney Council and a critical first step in exploring how businesses could play a role in raising revenue for local parks. Along with project partner, Groundwork London, staff from the Council's Parks Department tapped into an existing network of Shoreditch businesses and collected their ideas. These included the concept of creating rentable outdoor workspaces, an idea that did not offer instant appeal: "I was fairly sceptical at the beginning. I couldn't quite imagine how it would work and didn't think we had the budget to create something," recalls Sam Parry of Hackney's Parks Department.

But in a stroke of luck, ArtsAdmin, a local charity, approached the project team and offered to contribute towards the cost of building a tree office. A design team came together, a temporary structure was built very quickly in Hoxton Square and it was possible to test out this new idea.

With an eye-catching transparent exterior, the creative design of the workspace attracted a huge amount of local, national and international media attention. Initially, this translated into promising levels of bookings (25-50%), but this early interest waned as it became apparent that the design was not weatherproof. Unfortunately, the office was not secure either, and suffered regular break-ins and vandalism. The space was always intended as a temporary structure and after a five months it was dismantled. So, what did the partners learn from testing the idea?

They offer a very positive appraisal of the project.

The team learned a lot about the costs of this approach - this kind of business requires substantial human input and a very high quality build. In the words of Sam Parry of Hackney Council, "we wanted it to run itself - people would book online and then get a code to open the door - but in reality it required close co-ordination and management".

New partners and champions came forward. For instance, people working for businesses on the square volunteered their time to act as Tree X Office Guardians to oversee the space and check it regularly.

The partnership between Groundwork London and Hackney Council was strengthened. Groundwork London greatly valued the Parks Department's engagement with the project and their proactive, solution-focused approach. Similarly the Parks Department welcomed the independence that Groundwork London brought to the project and their determination to get it off the ground.

Opportunities to secure private sponsorship for a project of this kind were uncovered: had the timing been right there was the offer of a £30,000 investment in the build from a multinational technology company.

Most promising was the influx of requests, near the end of the project, for a bookable pop-up space. It became clear that start-ups are looking for short-term exclusive hire of attractive spaces where they can launch a product or test out their market at low risk. Requests for bookings for pop-up exclusive hire amounted to nearly £28,000 and although this couldn't be realised, it highlighted an unexpected market opportunity.

“We hit upon something with the pop-up idea and there may be an opportunity here either with a new build or with existing buildings. This model could work elsewhere. There will always be new business emerging across the country. It doesn't have to be a trendy tech start-up. It could be a café or a hairdressers or a dog grooming parlour for example. If you had a space that you could rent out for a few months for those sort of businesses to try out, then it could work in any area where there is a reasonable population nearby.”



Sam Parry,
Hackney Council

The partners all agree that they are now in a much stronger place to move forward with their plans to attract investment into the parks. Danielle Johnson, the project lead from Groundwork London, articulates the key lessons: “We've learnt that you have to get to know your local context and you have to build relationships with the businesses and local people who want to use the park; talking to them and then finding out ways to put their ideas into practice. You need an initial investment to make this happen but from here things can grow and evolve.”

WHAT DID THE TEAM LEARN AND WHAT ADVICE DO THEY GIVE TO OTHERS?

ADVICE RELATING TO THE TREE X OFFICE

- 1. Design and build** - It is essential to put practicalities ahead of aesthetics for the design and build process. Security and weatherproofing are essential for workspaces in parks. Although we had these things in our design brief, they were compromised in favour of visual impact, and this led to the early closure of the project.
- 2. Sponsorship** - It's difficult to raise cash donations from corporate sponsors for park spaces, but investing in a workspace (possibly even branded) can attract investment from corporates. Our financial model predicted £40k build costs and £20k income per year, based on 50% usage - taking 2 years to start paying back into the park. If the build costs were sponsored, then the space would start making a profit a lot sooner. Take time to engage possible sponsors and third parties with existing contacts.
- 3. More predictable income** - Despite previous research, demand for workspace was not reliable all year round. We would suggest:
 - a)** A membership model would create a predictable income stream. Try to secure bookings in advance of the build (booking from plans).
 - b)** Monthly bookings would be better if you can provide the necessary facilities (toilets, water, kettle), rather than hourly bookings which were very unpredictable.
 - c)** Cafe operator on site providing consistent rental income, especially across the winter, and either supplementing workspace bookings or allowing the workspace to be free.

Let the context guide the model - every park is different and what works in one space may not work in the other. You have to understand your specific park and the demand in that area.

4. Operations – Our aim was to link with an existing space manager. Towards the end of the project, we made contacts with an art studio provider who had a waiting list of 140 people. It would have been better to set this up in advance of the build, preferably with someone with experience and contacts in the field of space management. If you link the work space with an existing space (e.g café) you may need less operations support.

5. Test and learn – The test and learn method allowed us to adapt the model as we went. We changed the booking slots from 4 hours to 2 hours, we halved the price, and we offered free trials to the business network. With more time we would have been able to refine the model even further.

OVERALL PROJECT LEARNING AND ADVICE:

“Whilst in retrospect having four cubes was relatively expensive, I would definitely say there is a big value in having something physically placed in the park, as online consultation for a physical space doesn’t always match up.”

Make use of wider networks when engaging businesses; look outside the parks team and join up with business development teams and others who have the right networks and understand local businesses.

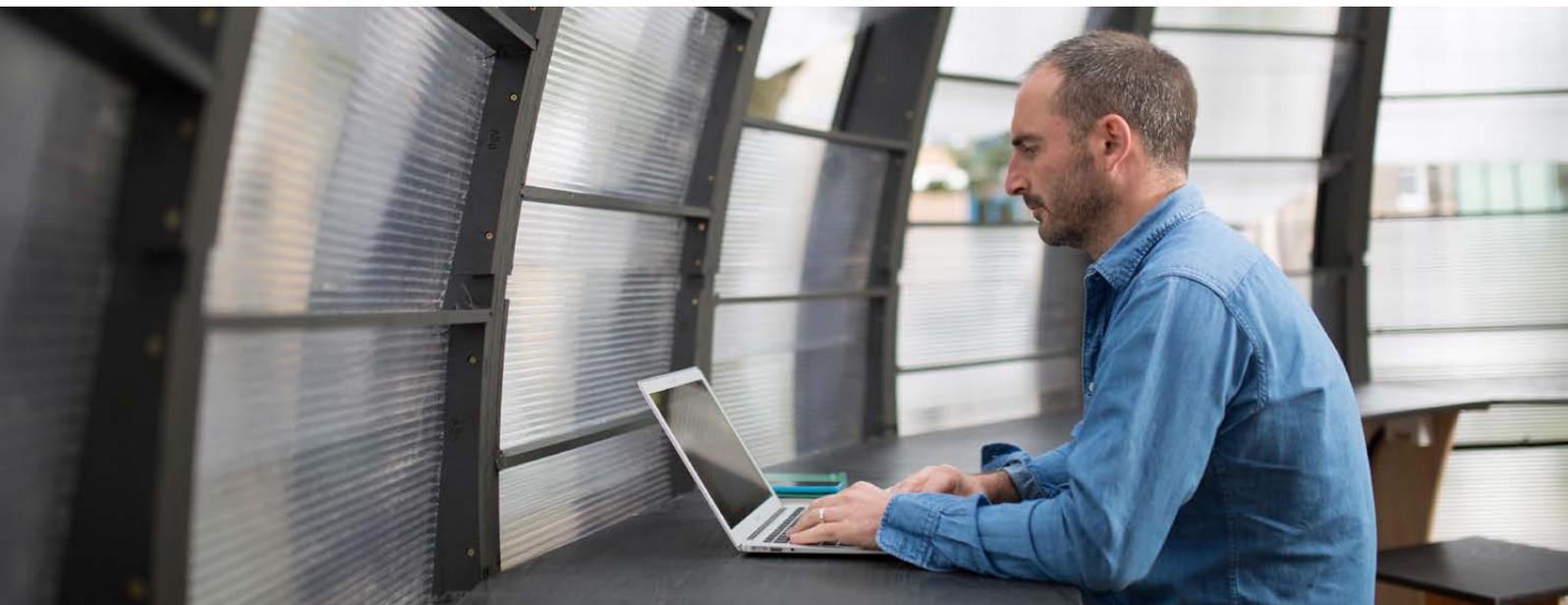
“We have relied on Duncan (Town Centre Manager at Hackney Council) who has all the business contacts in the area. It’s key to have a person like this who can connect with businesses.”

“Face to face outreach time has been invaluable, and complements the outreach we’ve been doing at events (such as the business breakfasts) and with current contacts via email.”

“Working in partnership can sometimes be tricky if you don’t share the same vision. Ascertaining this quickly is important. Taking action and changing partnerships can take time but can be beneficial to the project in the longer term.”

Most projects require creativity and capital. Through the Park Hack Innovators we brought together ‘ideas’ people who were strongly in favour of improving the squares in the area as a symbol of their connection with Shoreditch. But you need funding to deliver on some ideas, and widening the range of partners to include larger corporate organisations can help open up these opportunities too.

“Ensure you learn from things and are able to change quickly and act on the learning.”



QUICK GUIDE TO DELIVERY: PARK HACK

This Guide focuses on the steps for generating rental income from a new or refurbished structure in or near a park, based on the Park Hack Innovators' experience of the Tree X Office.

Feasibility Assessment

1. Assess demand for rented space in the location. For example, speak with local businesses, office space managers and letting agents, research local rents for meeting, work or retail spaces, and find out about vacancy rates. Where there seems to be demand, identify the kinds of businesses who are looking for space, and what they are looking for.
2. If there is demand, identify what prospective hirers / tenants require. Involve businesses in rapid prototyping - e.g. cardboard models - to explore ideal amenities and build design. If feasible, make a cheap real-world prototype (for example, a 'pop-up' in a vacant property) to test your ideas and allow potential users to identify what works and what doesn't.
3. Work with the park managing agent to identify a suitable existing building, or space to build or install something new.
4. Engage stakeholders, such as people in properties adjacent to the space, parks staff and managers, existing businesses in the park and Friends groups, to share your ideas and understand their concerns and ideas. The Park Hack team created a user group to test their ideas.
5. Calculate indicative costs of build / refit and operation. Include the cost of managing the property, estimated occupancy, any profit-share agreements with trading occupiers, and opportunities for sponsorship or other pro-bono contributions, as well as design specifications that respond to local demand.

Development

6. Recruit or assign a project manager to oversee design and build.
Work with the park's managing agent to secure relevant permissions for construction or refit.
7. Develop plans with an architect, reflecting constraints and requirements. Ensure plans are fit for purpose, and that design does not compromise function.
8. Create a communications plan for the project to keep stakeholders informed and also to engage and / or sign up prospective tenants.
9. Develop an appropriate booking process, lease agreements etc. This may be done through a property management agent or directly. Park Hack tried both, and found most success with agents - the income from extra bookings outweighed the agents' fees.
10. The team also recommend exploring a membership / subscription offer, which would provide more predictable income, but can take time to build.

Implementation

11. Build or refit structure.
12. Establish a system for site management and booking system - this may be through an agent / third party.
13. Advertise space, promote and sell the space using media, events and direct advertising. Ensure that stakeholders are kept informed and have the opportunity to feedback any issues.
14. Manage use of the property, upkeep and rental income. Take opportunities to gather feedback from users and other stakeholders as part of the process. Park Hack used surveys and competitions to gain feedback and insights throughout the life of the project.
15. Monitor use levels, income and expenditure. Adjust booking, management and maintenance processes, or the physical space where appropriate, in the light of performance and feedback.

WHERE CAN I GO TO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

<http://www.nesta.org.uk/parkhack-groundwork-london>
<http://www.parkhack.london/>
<http://www.gensleron.com/cities/2014/10/29/thinking-outside-the-box-in-londons-parks.html?e=planning-urban-design>

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