
IT'S NOT THEIRS

IT'S OURS

**OUR RADICAL APPROACH TO
COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP
FROM THE FRIENDS
OF HARDIE PARK**



IT'S TIME TO CUT OUT THE MIDDLE MAN

In recent years, parks and greenspaces have been recognised for their valuable contribution to health and wellbeing of local residents. In an era of large-scale housing development and an increasing urbanisation, these shared spaces are becoming all the more precious and needed.

However, over the past 30 years, investment in parks and their maintenance has declined. Bygone days would have seen a park keeper, a pair of eyes and ears, someone to take prompt action when things were broken or untidy.

Much of this is as a result of pressure on local authority budgets – the mantra to do more with less means that discretionary services suffer first. When an attempt to repair or restore a park is made, it is often too little, too late. As maintenance and upkeep declines, so the forces of anti-social behaviour and vandalism increase and new equipment is abused or destroyed.

Green spaces across the country are facing an all too familiar downward spiral: run-down and uncared for, parks become less appealing to spend time in, so use by the local community inevitably decreases. As the presence of the community diminishes, in move the trouble-makers: the vandals, the litterers and fly-tippers, the dog foulers, the arsonists, the gangs, the dealers. Before long, the park is so abused, misused and, oftentimes, downright dangerous, that the

local community go out of their way to avoid it: just what those ne'er do wells like.

Of course, the parks are also under-threat from demand for housing. They are valuable community-owned land and with local authorities struggling to find resources to enable them to maintain (never mind improve) these vital community spaces the pressure to realise these assets, in exchange for meeting a government house building quota, increases.

Increasingly, this has become the cue for the property developers to start circling. After a failed attempt (or two) to throw money at the problem, is it any wonder that cash-strapped authorities start to become increasingly open-eared to proposals for new, much needed apartment blocks, as developers sense a deal. Doesn't it make sense to get these burdensome eyesores off the council books, and get a bit of a cash injection for other under-funded services in the bargain? But when the land is sold, it is gone forever – and so continues the eradication of shared space for our communities. An opportunity lost.

But what if parks could be protected for future generations? Is there a way to improve parks AND reduce maintenance costs? What if community enterprise in parks could generate income, with new uses paying for improvements?

What if this cycle of decline can be broken?

"Communities are starting to wake up. Individuals and groups across the country are starting to say 'enough is enough' and are beginning to take the matter of improving their parks into their own hands"

Fortunately, communities are starting to wake up to this challenge. Individuals and groups across the country are starting to say 'enough is enough' and are beginning to take the matter of improving their parks into their own hands.

We are very proud to say that we have had one such community-led turnaround at Hardie Park, a small park in the town of Stanford-le-Hope in Thurrock, Essex. Our transformation story began in 2009 when, after years of decline, a brand-new piece of play equipment was installed and subsequently destroyed (in no more than 3 weeks) in an arson attack by a local schoolboy.

Dismayed by the state of the park on his doorstep, and frustrated by the poor investment, one local resident began to ask – what can we do? Using his community contacts, he organised a meeting of the great and good; Headteachers, Police Officers, Councillors, Council Officers, Youth workers, Church Leaders, Community Organisers. Over 80 people attended, with significant combined resources and influence. There was blame. There were excuses. There was wringing of hands, but no promise of action and even less talk of vision. Our local resident left despondent, unsure of the next step. Something had to change.

With nowhere left to turn, this local resident realised he had to (as the saying goes) be

the change he wanted to see. His first course of action wasn't complicated or grand: he just started to pick up litter. At 5:30am the day after the failed meeting, he went out and collected litter for one hour. He did same the next day. And the day after that. And all the days that followed. He collected litter nearly every day for 6 months. People started to notice and the mood in the park started to shift. Soon enough there was not much litter left to pick.

Since then, the park has gone from strength to strength. More residents joined in and we founded the Friends of Hardie Park group and have worked closely with the community to outline a new vision for the park – improving the place slowly but surely. There's been up and downs but, over time, we have proved that communities can take on responsibility for the assets in their neighbourhoods and create positive community impact that local authorities have only dreamed of.

With the resources we are now creating, we are hoping to share some of the principles and learnings that have shaped our approach to community-led stewardship of our local park, so that others might take inspiration from it and feel empowered to do similar things in their own localities. Know this – with enough determination, it is possible.

You can read more about our story on the Friends of Hardie Park homepage: www.friendsofhardiepark.co.uk

SMALL THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

When feeling the need to make change in your local area, our first instincts are often to 'go big' – getting petitions together, pestering local politicians, staging protests and publicity stunts. But, as we found out the hard way, starting at the top like this can quite easily lead to just further frustration. Any noise that you successfully make is lost amongst all the voices clamoring for their own piece of the publicity pie. And even if you do somehow manage to get some cut-through, your message will all too often fall on deaf ears. You'll likely be met with a barrage of pretty words and empty promises – as they say, talk is cheap. All that effort in campaigning, but very little change. Sometimes, however, the frustration you might feel at this let down by the system might be just the motivation you need to take back control!

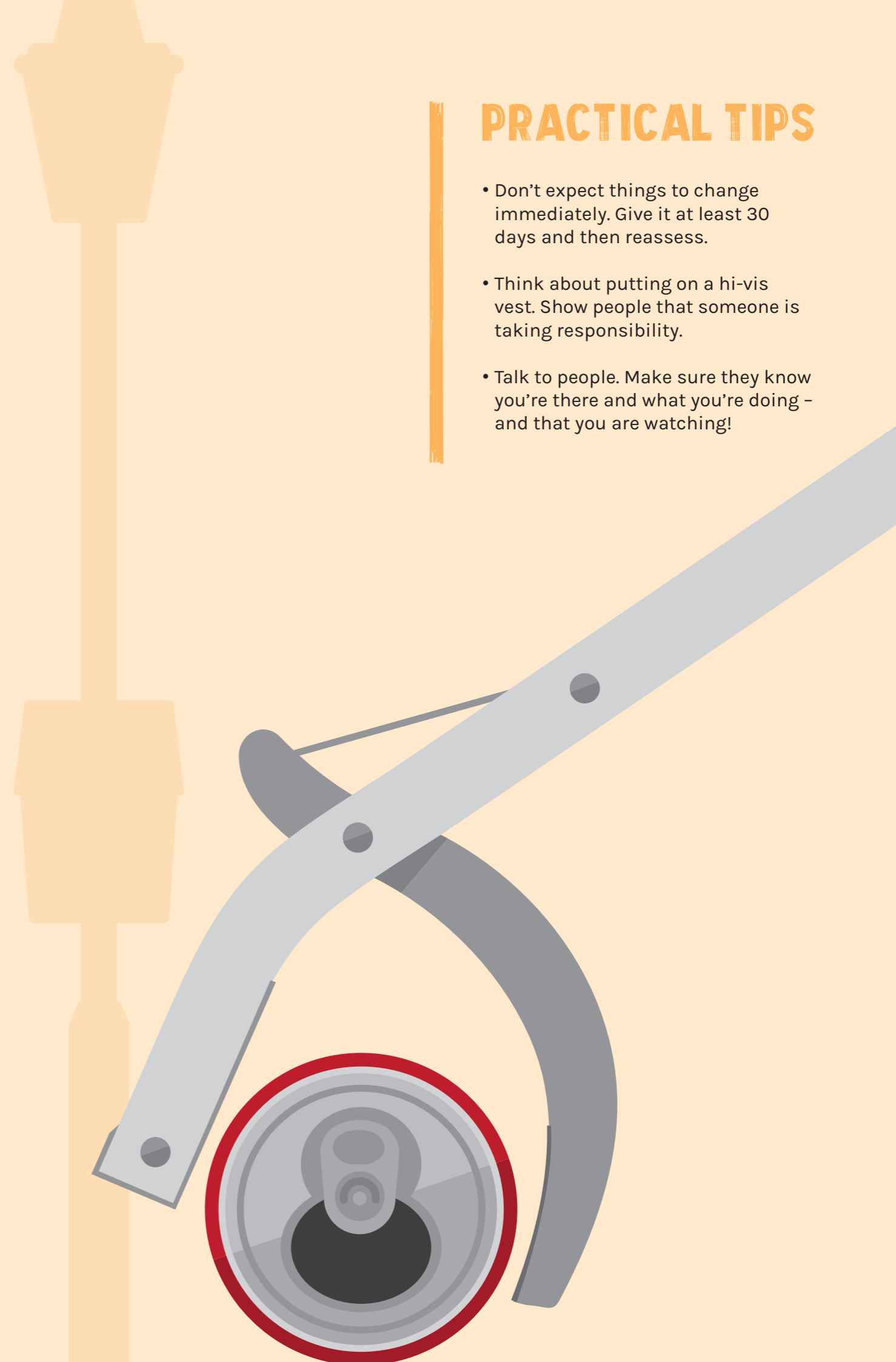
It's amazing to think, really, that all it needed to get the ball rolling at Hardie Park was some simple litter picking. It's not easy getting up at 5.30am in the morning before work, but to see the park gradually begin to change, day by day, is massively rewarding.

At the time, dog walkers were some of the few remaining people who frequented the park – most of them would come and go early. Some let their dogs foul the grass. A few carefully chosen words soon put a stop to that. Some would ask, 'Do you work for the Council?'. Of course the local authorities had no idea what was going on – but this did give our litter picker the idea to start wearing a high-vis vest. It's amazing how quickly people's behaviours change when then they think someone is watching, and perhaps even more importantly, that somebody cares for the place.

Behaviour is infectious. If people see others taking more care of their park – or even just see a little less litter strewn around – they just can't help but be a little more conscious of their own behaviour too. The downward spiral of neglect, abuse and avoidance can be turned around – and all it requires is someone who is willing to break the cycle with an act of will.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Don't expect things to change immediately. Give it at least 30 days and then reassess.
- Think about putting on a hi-vis vest. Show people that someone is taking responsibility.
- Talk to people. Make sure they know you're there and what you're doing – and that you are watching!



THE POWER OF FLOWERS

If litter picking is the way to start undoing the damage of years of neglect and abuse, flower planting is the way to turn the park from a no-man's land into a place that people want to linger in and enjoy.

As we began to formalise into the Friends of Hardie Park group, one of the first things we set about doing was getting the flora and foliage in order. A small group of us chipped in a few quid each and bought some bulbs and plug-plants to start bringing the flower beds back to life with.

Similarly to our litter picking experience, things didn't change overnight. In fact, after a hard day digging, weeding and planting, the team returned the next day to find that so much of their hard work had been undone by the vandals that still frequented the park after dark. All the plants had been pulled out – an angry protest, perhaps, at the idea that someone was attempting to lift the park out of its state of disrepair.

This was a test of our resolve. Some of the team were – at first sight of the damage – disheartened, and vowed to never make an effort again. After a bit of discussion,

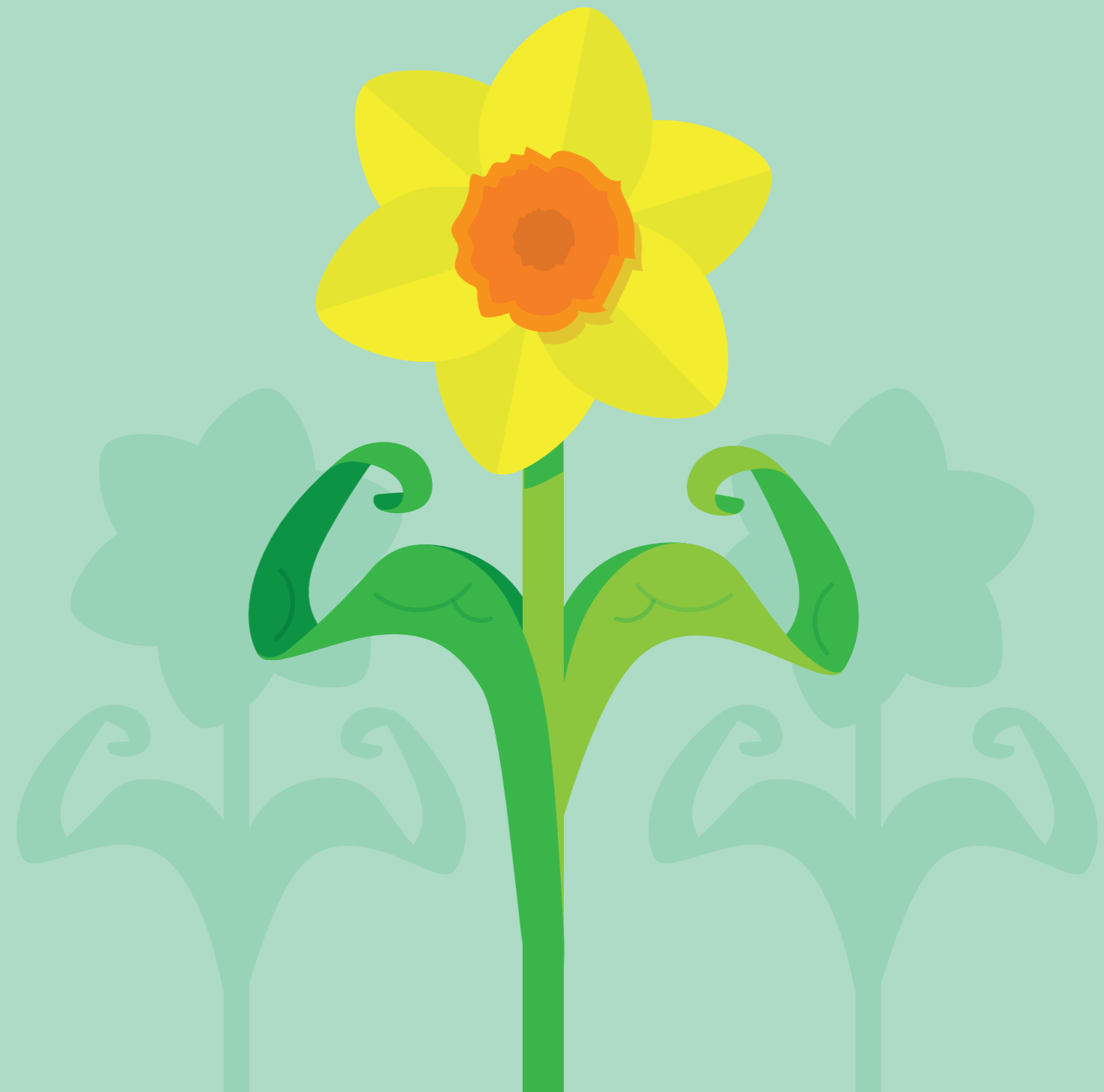
however, we agreed that we wouldn't let these vandals take our park from us. So, we simply tidied up the mess and planted the beds again.

Perhaps predictably, the plants were pulled up a second time, but this time it took a few days – the initial novelty of the act having presumably worn off a bit. So, we planted again. This time the plants lasted over a week, before being torn up and trodden on. We didn't stop. Soon the plants and flowers were lasting one, two, six months at a time without any signs of damage or disrespect. Before long, the vandals realised we weren't going away, so directed their antisocial energies elsewhere. A small but very significant victory.

These days when you visit Hardie Park you're greeted by banks of plants and flowers and luscious green grass. Is it any wonder that the local community started to filter back to the place to spend sunny days there, rather than simply passing through to get to the other side? The plants and flowers remain an important symbol of community presence and care.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Start small. You never know what will happen to your first flowers.
- Expect some trampling and uprooting. Don't give up before they do.
- Gather donations for plants and flowers to keep the park in full bloom.



USERS ARE THE BEST SECURITY

Try to start a conversation about how to reduce antisocial behaviour in your local park, and you'll inevitably find talk will quickly turn to gates and fencing, barbed wire and security cameras. As if a troubled park wasn't uninviting enough, these (what we like to call) 'grey and spiky' security measures are going to do little to make the local community feel like they want to spend more time in the park – meaning that the abuse and misuse can continue, now just with more cover!

At Hardie Park, we've avoided the grey and spiky things from the get-go. Our vision has been to create a place that is used and cherished enough by the local community that old antisocial behaviour is, slowly but surely, squeezed out. Rather than thinking up ways to keep things out, we've focussed on how we get the community to come in and hang around long enough to turn the park from an underused wasteland into a thriving community hub.

Our treasured café – repurposed lovingly and cost-effectively from an old, disused

pre-fab going begging at a local building site – is just one example of what you can do when you've got the eyes of the local community looking over things. When we first installed our café hub we used to bring the chairs inside at night, for fear they would be abused or stolen in our absence. As the park improved, we started leaving them out but secured with a bike lock, just in case. These days we barely worry about them at all, knowing that local community keep a watchful eye on their treasured park – and that local jobs know better than to try to bring us down.

It's the eyes and ears of the local community that keep well functioning parks and public space protected – and the best part is, they do all this work for free. Instead of wasting precious resources on useless security features, instead invest the money into making the park a place where upstanding citizens will want to spend their time, then watch the antisocial behaviour slink away.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Avoid the 'grey and spiky' – invest in things that bring the local community back to the park
- Events and activities are a great thing to organise to get the community rallying around the park
- Think about how your park can be more visibly in use more hours of the day and more days of the week



THE IMPORTANCE OF TOILETS

Whenever cut-backs are muted, one of the first things bound to be on the proverbial chopping block is the perceived public space ‘luxury’ that is the humble public convenience – evidenced by their increasing disappearance from parks and public spaces up and down the country.

And is it any wonder? Public loos are an absolute nuisance for local authorities to maintain. They need endless cleaning; opening and closing daily; power and water; maintaining and repairing. And, of course, let’s not forget about the vandalism and anti-social behaviour that can go on within them – especially when the local community begins avoiding the unkempt public spaces that the toilets reside in.

What these cost-cutting measures fail to recognise, however, is that the costs (holistically speaking) of closing public toilets may be far greater than the savings. When toilets in parks are boarded up, not only do they become another eyesore and symbol of abandonment, they also signal that this is not a place to linger. Practically speaking, spending any length of time in a park without toi-

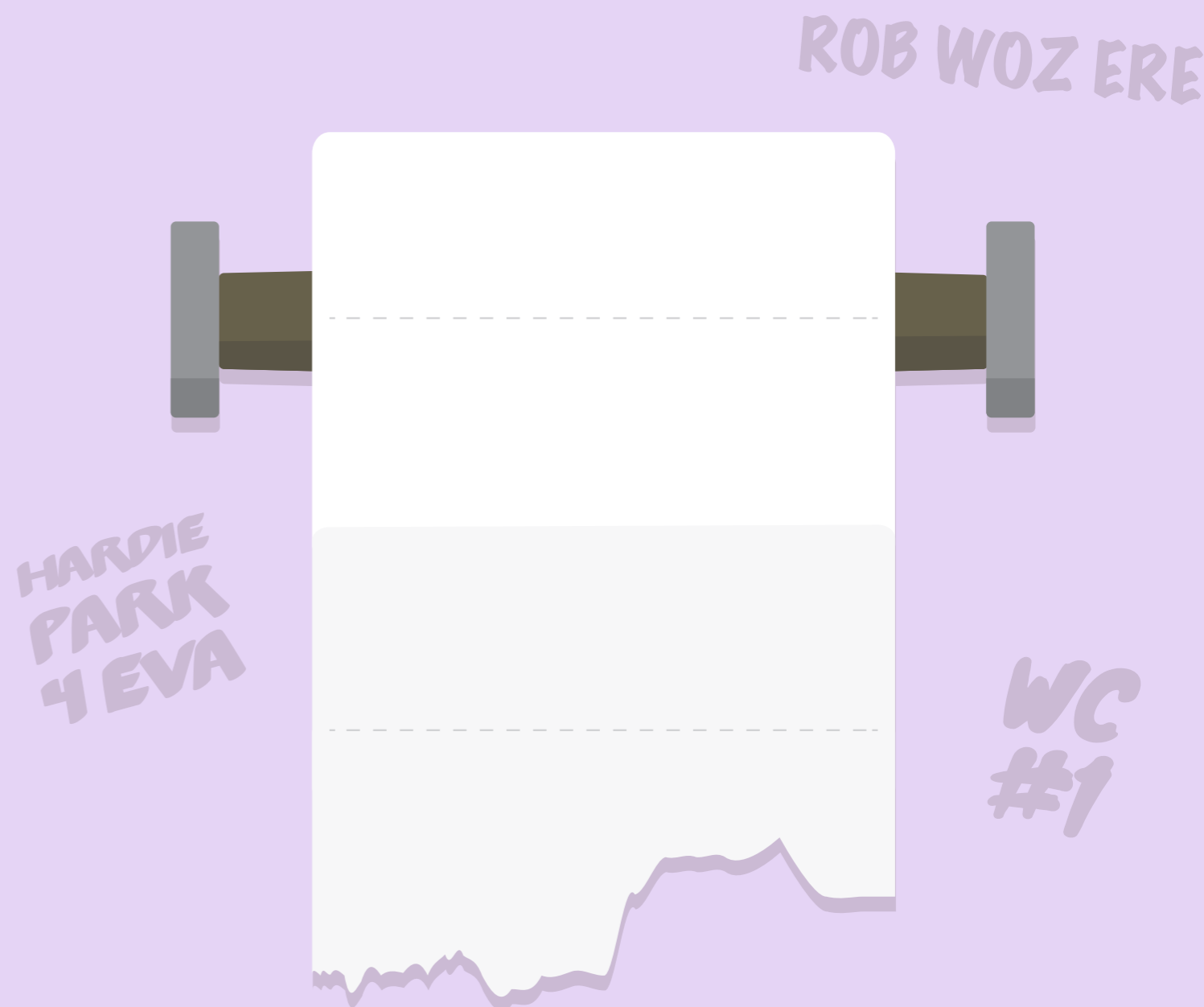
lets becomes difficult – especially when children and senior citizens involved (never mind disabled local residents who might rely on facilities more than others).

When we opened up toilets, Hardie Park became a place where the local community could comfortably spend a stretch of several hours – opening up all sorts of possibilities for days out, gatherings and events and bringing much need ‘life’ back to the place.

If ‘users are the best security’, then clean, accessible toilets are one of the key foundations for keeping the all-important ‘eyes and ears’ in the park. And as for the cost of maintenance? By making our toilets an integrated part of our busy café hub, vandalism and anti-social behaviour are given little chance to operate as the café staff and local residents effectively stand guard all day, every day.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Locate toilets next to the busiest parts of your park to ward off the vandals
- Ensuring toilets are open as much as possible, gives the community the ability to rely on their presence and plan for longer stays
- A clear and consistent timetable for toilet opening hours helps park users plan their activities accordingly.



BUREAUCRACY IS NOT LAW

One of the main things that stops citizens taking control of under-served parks and greenspaces is a fear of treading on toes – a perceived threat of local authority red-tape. Communities feel they need to ask for permission, and local authorities seem unwilling or ill-equipped to give it out.

Communities have become all too used to being done to rather than doing for themselves. When local groups do get up the courage to take control, the language and ways of working of local authorities can all too often seem mysterious and impenetrable, especially to those without professional backgrounds.

All the pomp and ceremony of local authorities' meetings and form filling can make it feel like they are the experts and us citizens are simply lesser mortals. From our experience, however, this couldn't be further from the truth. Scratch just a little under the surface formalities and you'll see that councils and their staff don't necessarily know much more than the rest of us, and their precious rules and regulations are all up for debate if you can give them something in exchange.

When we decided something needed to change with Hardie Park, we went to great lengths to get the great and the good together. We tried our best to go down

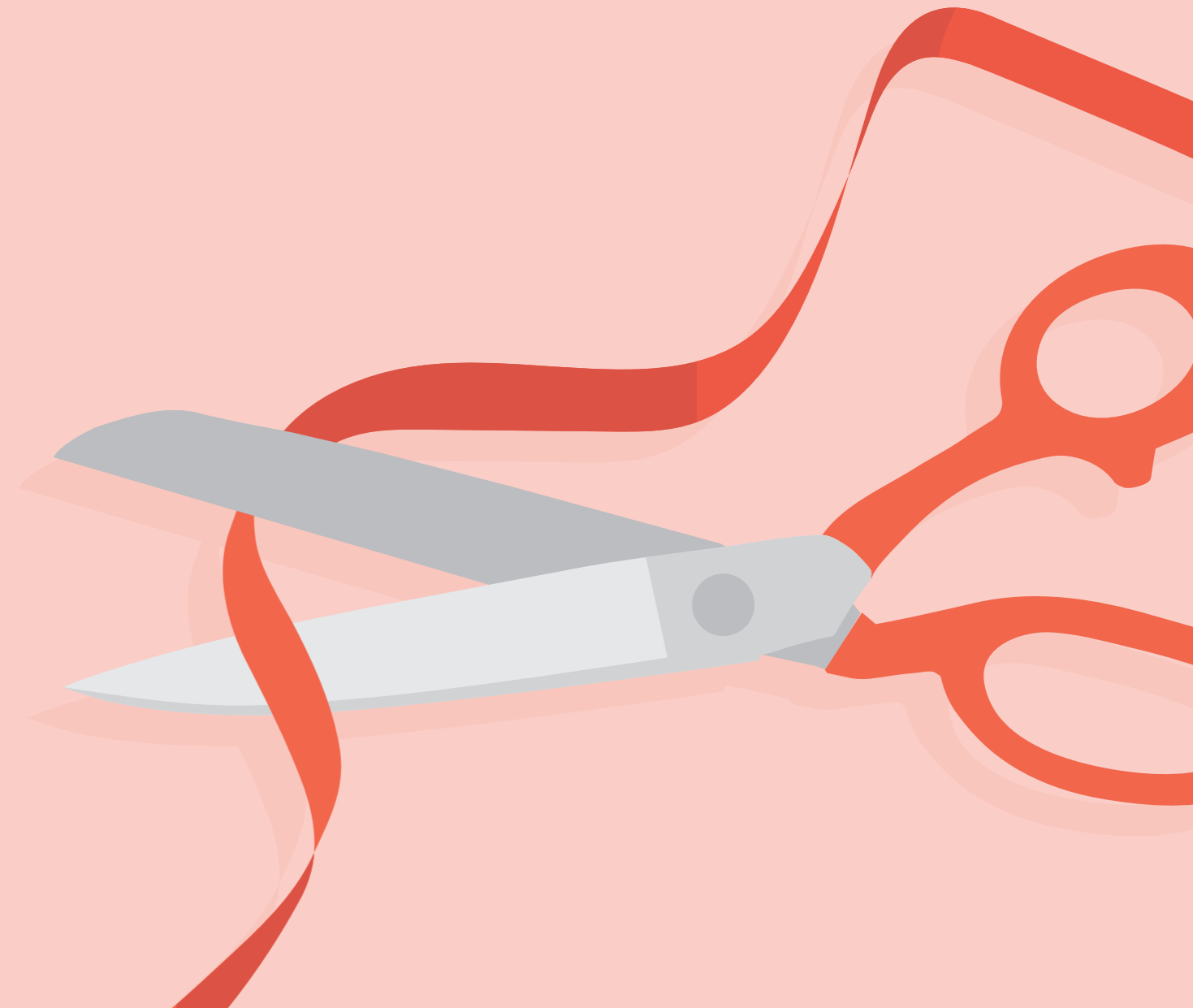
the formal routes but found that talk was cheap and little happened. Only when we realised we needed to take control – without necessarily asking for permission – did things start to change for the better.

We're not ashamed to say that, over the years, we've tested the rules again and again. We've found that, when push comes to shove, things are not as set in stone as they first seem. As long as you're making a positive difference, doing it responsibly and safely, and not willing to back down, the authorities that be are not that likely to stand in your way.

This is, of course, not to say that community groups should take an adversarial stance with local authorities – partnership can be hugely valuable where it's possible and productive. But it is crucial to remember that you don't need to allow yourself to be pushed around, and that the status quo can be challenged. If we hadn't pushed back here and there, we wouldn't have got where we are today. As the old saying goes – sometimes it's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Having a team member with a professional (or even council) background can be really helpful in getting to grips with local authority processes and peculiarities
- Don't be afraid to challenge the status quo. Nothing changes if nothing changes.
- Sometimes it's better to beg for forgiveness, than ask for permission



LOCAL FOLKS DO IT BETTER

Before we fundraised, design and installed a new concrete skatepark, we had some tattered old skate ramps and we often had problems with broken glass causing safety issues for the local kids. Over time we came to a rather simple and efficient solution. When local kids spotted some stray shards on the floor, they dropped us a text message or gave us a quick call. Living nearby, it wasn't a big deal for us to pop out with a dustpan and brush and sweep the danger away – letting the kids get back to their skating in a matter of minutes.

Just imagine if the local authorities tried to deliver such a service – the costs would be enormous! The glass would likely hang around for days, getting messier and more dangerous and inviting further littering as it did. How much cheaper and more efficient then, to rely on local communities to pick up these little maintenance tasks – something that they are likely to be happy to do given sufficient ownership and autonomy.

For some reason, we've become so accustomed to being 'done to' as a society, that we assume it must be more efficient and effective to centralise things that were once the responsibility of the local communities.

Another funny story from our back catalogue helps show how valuable it can be to leverage local community interest. When

we proposed that we would take charge of cutting the grass at Hardie Park, we were challenged by a local authority official "How do I know you're not going to be here today and gone tomorrow?" he said accusingly. Fortunately, we'd done our homework and had found that this officer in question was on a temporary contract with the council and would be leaving his post in a matter of months. We politely suggested that, being local residents to the park, we would likely be sticking around a good while longer than he would be – a truth which he couldn't deny.

Needless to say, we took on the task of tending to the grass in the park, just using some basic mowers we begged and borrowed. And then, as if to prove our point, one particularly wet spring, the council were having all sorts of problems getting grass cut across the area. Hardie Park was the only park for miles that was cut on time, all thanks to the local community. Nowadays, we have a better partnership when it comes to mowing. We call it the 'Heineken' arrangement, we mow parts that the Council can't reach! They will regularly come round with their tractor mower, mowing 90% of the park in 20 minutes and we complete the fiddly bits around benches and play equipment.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Remember: a group of determined locals can do more than a over-stretch council ever could
- Don't wait around for the council to do things. Nip problems in the bud by addressing issue yourself in less than half the time
- Keep things simple. For example, you don't necessarily need big machinery to run a park. Use whatever the community has at hand.



EVERYONE HAS A GIFT TO GIVE

A big part of our philosophy (and our success if you ask us) at Hardie Park is rejecting the idea that communities can't do things for themselves. Given the right conditions, and the right leadership, ordinary people can do tremendous things for their local communities and environments. People so often just need to be given an excuse and to feel that others are pulling in the same direction.

We take the stance that everyone has something to offer Hardie Park. We've opened up our group and operation to everyone who wants to be involved and have benefited endlessly from people's various contributions. We've seen lives turned around as people have used the group and the park to develop their skills and experience.

This belief extends all the way to our leadership. When we were attacked on social media by a disgruntled local resident due to overflowing dog waste bins, instead of going on the defensive, we reached out to the man in question and asked if – as he was clearly so passionate about the issue – he would like to help us fix the problem. Fast forward a few years, and this disgruntled man became a key part of our group's leader-

ship and helped get Hardie Park to where it is today – including being instrumental in sourcing the donation of our hub building from a local building site.

Our operation relies on the generosity of volunteers, donating their time and efforts to keep Hardie Park going. All they demand in return is that their contribution is valued and put to best use. We continue to strive to make this the case, ensuring that volunteers feel the gratitude of the group and the community. Anyone wishing to replicate the successes of Hardie Park will also most likely need to rely on the contributions of volunteers. Recruiting and maintaining volunteers is one of the toughest tasks of running an operation like this. By seeing the potential in everyone, the pool of potential contributors becomes ever bigger.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Look for people's strengths, rather than dwelling on their weaknesses – everyone has something to offer
- Turn any negativity in the community into positivity by inviting them to take an active role in what you're doing
- Gratitude is the lifeblood of a community group – communicate it and nurture it in the local community



**DISGRUNTLED
LOCAL**
@disgrnt77

Where are the Friends
of Hardie Park now?!
#rubbish



BEG, BORROW, AND EARN

An important part of running a cash-strapped community group is being resourceful. Because we're so used to seeing local councils running the show, we think you need big budgets and all sorts of fancy machines and equipment to maintain parks and greenspaces, but actually, the tools that the local community often have laying around in the sheds at home can get the job done (and often a lot more efficiently – see 'Local Folks Do It Better').

There really is no limit to how resourceful you can be. When we wanted to build a hub in Hardie Park, we knew that getting funding for a building was going to be difficult and take a long time. Instead, we approached a local company to ask about a seemingly disused pre-fab building. Lo and behold, they were only too happy to donate the thing to our cause and get it off their land.

Getting a free building is one thing, but getting it ready for use is another. We still had to figure out how we were going to create the foundations and deal with things such as toilets and plumbing. Again, we looked around for help. We were able to borrow a digger and called in some favours from some local tradesfolk to get us up and running. And when

we wanted to find a way to make the old pre-fab look a bit more inviting, one chap donated a stack of timber that we could use as cladding. Without our connections in the community, the Hardie Park hub would probably not exist today.

Another key part of keeping the lights on is to be entrepreneurial. Applying for grants can be a great way to make big things happen (e.g. a new skatepark here, a new playground there) but the process can be time consuming and the conditions that can come with the money can be limiting. By finding a few ways to generate just a little of our own income, we've always got a little bit of cash to make things happen that wouldn't otherwise. For us, we churn out teas, coffees and food in our volunteer run café and put on the odd event that can bring hundreds of paying customers to the park. The way for other parks to make a bit of cash will depend on what opportunities the local area and community provides (e.g. Near a train station? Prime place for a coffee kiosk perhaps?), but finding a way to keep a bit of a 'rainy day' fund in the coffers can make things a lot easier in the long run.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- As they say, it's often not about what you know, it's who you know. Having people in your group who can call in favours can save you a small fortune
- Developing some small income streams (e.g. coffees, events etc.) can put some no-strings money in the coffers for when it's needed
- Think about the unique opportunity that your park/greenspace presents. What does the local area need that you can provide at a profit?



Rethinking Parks



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