

Forces of Change: Lessons Learned from 18 Years with an Environmental and Community Charity

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**This paper sets out the views of the author only and does not necessarily represent the views of FORCE. Rob was Chair of FORCE from 2003 to 2021 and continues as a Trustee*

Introduction

This paper sets out a series of 25 personal findings from 18 years as the Chair and Trustee of a small environmental and community charity working in the River Crane catchment in west London. These findings relate directly to the role of a small community organisation seeking improvements to open spaces in an urban setting, particularly along a river corridor, although some of the findings are applicable to the wider third sector. It is not intended as a definitive or authoritative list - these are personal views and (hopefully) subject to change and development. I hope they may prompt interest, comment and debate and look forward to being a part of this.

The River Crane is a 35km long river in a 120 sq km catchment in urban west London, rising in the London Borough of Harrow and flowing south through Ealing, Hillingdon, Hounslow and Richmond boroughs before entering the tidal Thames in Isleworth. The river corridor links a series of linear and larger green areas, totalling around 1500 hectares of public open space and representing an important, if somewhat neglected, environmental resource for west London.

Friends of the River Crane Environment (FORCE) www.force.org.uk is a small charity, formed in 2003 with the objectives of protecting and enhancing the environmental and community value of the River Crane corridor. Over the last 18 years FORCE has worked with a wide variety of partners to help deliver these objectives through small scale and cumulative actions. This paper helps tell the story of how this has been achieved by means of 25 findings that have also acted as guidelines along the way.

1. Friends Groups often start by objection to a threat or challenge – put forward a more attractive option as part of any objection

FORCE started in response to a proposal by the local council to remove protections from five open spaces as a precursor to building on them. A group of local people met together in order to object to this proposal and, realising both that the spaces were all in the lower Crane corridor and that the corridor itself was a valuable but little known environmental resource for west London, formed FORCE to harness our objections. We now know that many Friends groups were originally set up in response to comparable threats to their local open spaces.

We agreed early on that we did not want to merely object to what was being proposed but to develop an alternative vision for the open spaces, which had been subject to many years of neglect. This vision was developed in the months leading up to a Public Inquiry and the group pledged to help deliver on this vision if we were successful. Eighteen years on, these open spaces are much improved and highly valued assets for the local community, and our interests have extended beyond them and up and down the river corridor. Many of the original 2003 campaigners remain as Trustees and volunteers with FORCE.

2. Be clear and consistent about the overall objectives and how to deliver them

Our objectives from the start have been to *“Enhance the environmental and community value of the river corridor*”*. These twin objectives are key – providing environmental enhancements at the same time as delivering community benefits. When engaging with any proposed scheme, project or development, our fundamental question is – how will it impact the environmental and

community value of the Crane corridor? For better and/or for worse. The answers to this question will in principle determine whether we support or oppose it.

Value, and how it is defined, is a key element here. Environmental value is a function of the available habitats within the space, and the flora and fauna that benefit from those habitats, at least in part because of its connectivity with other open spaces. The linked open spaces along a river like the Crane are critically important to the environmental value of urban west London. Just looking into the sky above the Crane valley will reveal that many of the birds are flying along the line of the green corridor and using it as an environmental highway.

The community value of an open space is a function of the number of people living locally and the strength of their feelings (positive and negative) towards the open space. The great importance of an open space in an urban area is the sheer number of people that live within a short walk of it and can potentially benefit from it. Community value can take many forms – as a recreational resource; an educational asset; a benefit to public health (physical, mental and emotional); a means of promoting social cohesion; a provider of training and employment; and as a route for green transport.

In many cases the current value of an open space is considerably less than its potential, and in some cases the local population may view the space as having a negative impact on their lives, often due to its neglect over many years. It is critical therefore, when evaluating any public open space, to consider the potential value as well as the current value.

**This includes the green space and the blue space*

3. The permeability of a green corridor is key to its value – for both wildlife and people

River corridors are often a major environmental asset in urban areas, as they provide a ribbon of open water, often bordered by green space and linking larger open areas. This is certainly the case with the River Crane corridor, where the river passes through a series of linear and wider green spaces, often protected from development due to flood risk, enlightened planning policies and/or historical use for water powered industry or as a riverside private estate.

Linked open spaces are also a great community asset, allowing the exploration of nature with little or no urban reminder, as well as providing an attractive green transport route that encourages walking and cycling as alternatives to driving.

In many cases though, the linkages between these green spaces are indistinct or broken. Problems include closed and overgrown paths, poor or non-existent signage, inappropriate development and the cross cutting of roads and railways.

Linkages along the River Crane were also reduced due to the segmentation of the river corridor into five different London boroughs (from 1965) such that there was no overview of the corridor's value. Using the river itself as a borough boundary has further reduced its value as all organisations have a tendency to focus less on their margins.

One of our major objectives has been to protect and improve the permeability of the River Crane corridor. Environmental permeability has been improved by for example marginal planting with coir rolls along concrete lined sections and the provision of artificial kingfisher nesting banks where no natural river banks are available. Community linkages have been provided by

negotiating new riverside public open spaces and pathways as part of new developments, installing new and improved signage, creating leaflet maps, and introducing people to the spaces through guided walks and talks. Around every two years FORCE undertakes a guided walk along the full 35 km length of the river, both to show it is possible (if difficult) to walk the whole length and to undertake a first-hand check of its condition and use.

The coherence of the valley as a whole received an enormous boost with the formation of the Crane Valley Partnership (CVP) www.cranevalley.org.uk in 2005, bringing all five boroughs together with other key interested parties to work in the interests of the catchment as a whole. CVP continues to be a key organisation, co-ordinating catchment wide activities, and operating at a scale that is beyond our capacity.

In 2021 a new organisation, called the Crane Valley Community Interest Company, was set up to host the Partnership. The Crane Valley CIC has representation from 20 community groups and charities along the river, including FORCE, and is intended to further enhance the linkages between each local community and the overall river corridor.

4. The names of spaces are important - and they can be changed

Names can help define a space. One of the first spaces we worked on in 2003 was known officially as the “disused former Mereway allotments site”. This site name – with a tautological emphasis on its disuse – appears designed to portray a lack of value, earmarking it for development. One of our first actions was to re-name the site as “Mereway Nature Park” and we put up a notice board to this effect on the site. We knew that we had achieved a shift in council thinking when the parks dept also started to use the name and subsequently put up their own “Mereway Nature Park” signs. Each time we take on a new site we try to make sure there is an appropriate name for it and seek to have this accepted more widely.

5. Urban green spaces may be less iconic – in terms of species types and picturesque beauty – but their value is enhanced by the numbers of people that can benefit from them

A frustrating discovery in our early years was the relative lack of interest many wildlife experts, people we viewed as our natural allies, would show for our local open spaces. In their eyes the value of these spaces was limited by the lack of nationally rare habitats and species they contained. This bias also shows in the protections shown to local spaces, which are also largely a function of their national ecological rarity value.

In our view the environmental value of a site is due not just to the rarity of its flora and fauna but also to its importance for the local human population and the number of people able to appreciate it. A kingfisher may not be a nationally rare bird – but the thrill of seeing a kingfisher in an urban setting, and the beneficial impact this has on the lives of local people, increase its value as an environmental asset. We will continue to look for and support the local range of interesting and threatened species in the Crane valley (such as water voles, adders and brown long eared bats for example), whilst also appreciating and protecting the simple virtues of green spaces, clear water and bird song in an urban setting.

6. There is a general rule of 10 for support

This rule of 10 first revealed itself several years ago when looking at the number of FORCE members (around 500 at the time) and then considering how many of them were actively involved

in our activities (around 50). At first this was frustrating and we tried to engage more people – and then we thought this ratio may just be a given rule for organisations like ours (a rule of 10). More thought revealed this rule extends further – with around 5 of these 50 people doing a good proportion of the work and contributing a significant part of their time to our cause.

Looking outwards we realised there are around 5000 people that both know and support us in other ways than being a member – public votes for example or Facebook likes – whilst our public use surveys indicate that around 50,000 directly benefit from the work we do by using the open spaces. Finally, some 500,000 people live within a short walk of the Crane valley and could potentially benefit.

The best way of growing these numbers is therefore to be aware of all of them, reach out at all these different levels of engagement, and accept the rule of 10 as a given. Now, in 2021, we have just over 750 members, and the numbers actively engaged and aware of our activities have both grown in proportion.

7. There is also a rule of ten for our finances

As a volunteer only organisation FORCE does not have major financial outgoings and we see this as a major asset (see also 11 below). Our operating costs are in the order of £3000 per annum whilst our direct turnover (principally in the form of grant funded project work) is in the order of £30,000 per annum. Given our structure we look to leverage our work to deliver projects through partners and steering group structures – and the typical turnover of this work is in the order of £300,000 per annum. Our objective is to have these investments provide a 1:10 ratio benefit in terms of the value provided to local communities – ie around £3million per annum.

This 1:10 gearing is not innate to organisations like FORCE but it is a target that we currently apply due to our low cost base combined with a core strategy of encouraging and supporting partnership working, searching for leverage from our efforts wherever possible.

8. Work on the ground is critical to our sustainability

The work of FORCE ranges over many practical activities as well as strategic working and planning with different partners. The practical work on the ground, through volunteer days, outdoor education events and “walks & talks”, remains of paramount importance to us. This work allows us to make a direct beneficial impact on local spaces and communities and to engage with local people to find out what their key concerns and objectives are. It is essential to staying grounded and informs all our plans and strategies.

9. Small scale and often provides major cumulative benefits

An early finding from our volunteer days was how much can be done by twenty people working manually over the course of a day. There is a great level of satisfaction to be gained from comparing the condition of a site at the end of the day with that at the start. Over the years we have increased the amount of volunteer work we deliver on sites from once a month to several times a week, working with partners, principally TCV (The Conservation Volunteers - as well as their Green Gyms) for project delivery.

Volunteer events are our preferred means of implementing project works – though at times contractors with mechanised equipment are essential. The advantages of using volunteers are the slow and cumulative benefits that can be derived, allowing regular amendments and tweaking in response to circumstances, combined with the high level of engagement from the volunteers

themselves and the community members they engage with whilst on site and during the following weeks.

As a result the projects are well integrated into community life, accepted by local people and capable of regular further maintenance and improvement. Often the alternative is to have a contractor constructed scheme that few local people understand or appreciate and is then vulnerable to deterioration from the day it is completed.

10 Quantification is very powerful

Around eight years ago a new Trustee initiated twice annual surveys of public use at several locations around the lower Crane valley. These data have been of great value in understanding the use these spaces are receiving and how these patterns of use change with time. Quantified data are also powerful allies when arguing for more resources or new investments in a local area – be it an improved pathway or new road crossing for example. As a friend recently told me; *“Without data you’re just another person with an opinion”*.

Interestingly, the use data suggest that major improvements to a local open space – usually in the form of improved access – typically result in an order of magnitude increase in public use. As public use increases then so does the proportion of women and children using the spaces, with increased use having a self-policing effect and improving the general sense of public safety in an open space. A target for a healthy and well used public open space is to have a 1:1:1 ratio between men, women and children.

In the last five years, following many years of volunteer days and rubbish collection, we started to record the types, numbers and weight of litter we collected. This too has had a considerable effect on our understanding of the litter issue, where and how it accumulates. It is becoming clear that much of the litter is dropped at individual hot spots, and may be an adjunct to other anti-social behaviour. Litter encourages more litter, and targeting these hot spots can significantly reduce the rate of accretion. Conversely, when a place is generally litter free, a few engaged individuals will often start picking up any litter found themselves. Encouraging local pro-social behaviour of this type, promoting an increased sense of community ownership and responsibility for local open spaces, is a major objective of FORCE.

11. No staff – the benefits and limitations

FORCE made a key decision, almost a decade ago, not to engage staff in support of the charity. Instead we operate through the work of our Trustees and volunteers, supplemented by a network of mostly local contractors that work on specific deliverables. A lot of work is done with key partners, where these partners provide much of the project delivery.

This model puts a major workload on our Trustees, who are delivering projects as well as overseeing work by others. For this reason we restructured five years ago to a portfolio model. We have seven portfolios (planning, volunteering, education and community, partnerships, wildlife, membership and communications), each with a strategy and project team, and this federalised structure provides much increased capacity for project delivery.

One of the key benefits of having no staff is that we do not have to worry about bringing in funds to pay them. Our project work can be designed on the basis of need, opportunity and capacity to deliver, and can wax and wane in response to these variables. In addition, we are a valuable and

enthusiastic partner for other organisations that do have staff. Our role will often be to help define a project, bring in the funding and help manage the project through a steering group; whilst the core delivery, as well as the major costs and management tasks, are undertaken by our partners and their staff.

As public investment reduces, so the opportunities and challenges of partnerships grow. In general it is becoming easier to partner with organisations such as local authorities, private and public sector bodies such as the Environment Agency and Thames Water, as well as universities and third sector organisations. We see there is a key role for volunteer based organisations in adding value to public open spaces, but we do not want to stray into areas that should in our view be delivered by the statutory sector. We see these partnerships as key ways to add value to open spaces, drawing in and pooling funds, resources and expertise from a number of sectors to improve these spaces – but not to save costs.

This year we have helped to set up the Crane Valley CIC. This organisation is employing contracted staff and has enabled a further step change in the amount of work that can be delivered in the Crane Valley as a whole. It will be interesting to assess how sustainable this new model of project delivery can be.

12. How are the values of open space calculated; and improvements monetised and re-invested?

These are key questions for the management of public open space – and ones for which there are no clear answers. As noted in 2 above, we see “value” as the key component to consider when considering open spaces. This value can be intrinsic to a space – its environmental existence value for example. However, particularly in an urban area with a huge premium on land price, the value generally needs to be enhanced through human use and active appreciation. One of our key tasks is to encourage this whilst also protecting and enhancing the environmental value which is often the core asset of the space.

Community value is a function of a range of factors including - simple public amenity; the impact of the space on local social cohesion; public health benefits of exercise and fresh air as well as mental health benefits of peaceful engagement with nature; how the space functions as a green transport link; its use as an educational resource for outdoor learning – for children and adults; and how it provides opportunities for training and employment.

Various academic means have attempted to quantify these values and yet it remains difficult due to the largely intangible nature of the benefits. One metric is to look at the house price effect of proximity to a local open space. When this open space is run down and seen as a threat it will have a negative drag on prices – whereas a well-used and attractive open space, particularly including open water, can have a 10 per cent or greater benefit to local house value.

Typically the investment required to transform an open space from a local liability to an asset is several orders of magnitude less than the cumulative benefit to local house value (as a crude proxy for overall value). One great challenge for the sector is how to re-invest some of this accrued value back into the local spaces to ensure they are well maintained and continue to improve as local assets.

13. What to do when spaces become over-used?

The assessment of value assumes that the more people use a space the more its community value grows. This is generally true, but increased public use brings pressures and challenges as well as benefits. It can bring conflicts with the environmental value of the space – and one major issue in many urban open spaces is the impact of dogs on nesting birds and other wildlife. An approach to this we have adopted is to discourage public access through selected high environmental value areas by the use of attractive natural barriers and impediments such as hedges and wood piles.

Increased use also brings conflicts between different types of user, a general increase in wear and tear, and a loss of some of the fundamental value associated with a peaceful space. There are several hundred thousand visitors per year to parts of the lower Crane, whereas parts of the middle and upper reaches of the valley have less than ten thousand visits per year. As the lower valley becomes more popular then we look to improve both access to, and the community value of, other parts of the corridor and encourage people to explore further afield. We are working with partners to link to other linear open space assets – including the Colne, Brent and Thames valley systems, to create a permeable grid network through and beyond west London.

The issue for us is put into context by the 6 million people per annum that visit nearby Richmond Park, and we continue to learn by observing the approaches of Royal Parks and other partners to comparable challenges.

14. Partners need only an overlap of interests

FORCE actively seeks partnerships with individuals and organisations that have an interest in the Crane valley. All organisations are made up of individuals, and it is often the interests and passions of particular individuals that can make a partnership work. We seek to be clear and straightforward about our agenda and keep this as simple as possible – ie looking for net benefits to the environmental and community value of the Crane valley. We also seek clarity on the agendas of prospective partners and will work with all that have a significant overlap of declared interests and objectives. In all cases the proof of an effective relationship is what happens on the ground.

15. All areas of open space would benefit from community support

FORCE is not capable of meeting all the needs of the Crane valley and nor would it be appropriate for us to do so. Ideally, every open space along the river corridor would have its own interest group, created and run by the local community. Whilst this may not be possible, it remains in our interests to support and encourage the development of local groups and individuals to become more pro-active regarding the opportunities and challenges of their local open spaces. FORCE operates the principle of subsidiarity, whereby more local groups are encouraged to take on as much activity and responsibility as they wish to, within a supported environment. Organisations like *Habitats and Heritage*, which provide support to new groups as they start to form, are of immense help in this process.

This objective was a major driver for the recent creation of the Crane Valley CIC, to represent the interests of all the community groups within the Crane valley and to encourage more to start up. We also recognised that the Friends group structure is not appropriate for everyone and different

communities have their own approaches to organisation and engagement. The bottom line is to support all groups and individuals that are operating to protect and enhance the community and environmental value of these open spaces.

16. Engage early and optimistically with development proposals and planning policies

The best opportunity to find a mutually agreeable solution that provides significant open space benefits is early in the planning process. The same holds true for both new build plans from developers and planning policy proposals from councils and other regulatory organisations. Planning policy can be difficult to comprehend, and requires consistent and detailed responses over a long time period, but in the end it is in planning process where the major benefits and risks for local open spaces often lie. In our experience it can take five to ten years to deliver improvements through planning, but the provision of several hectares of new public open space, and providing new and improved riverside access for the first time, can be the uniquely satisfying outcomes.

17. The Value of Citizen Science

In 2013 FORCE helped to start Citizen Crane, a citizen science project that uses volunteers at a dozen sites up and down the river to make monthly assessments of river condition using invertebrate kick sampling (RMI) and the analysis of water quality samples. This project has been successful in developing a much better understanding of the chronic pollution problems in the river and identifying means of resolving them. It has also engaged small groups of local people at regular intervals along the river, empowering them as custodians.

An essential aspect of this project has been the active engagement of Thames Water and the Environment Agency, as project steering group members, with Thames Water also providing laboratory facilities for sample analysis. This engagement has enabled the project to inform and influence their investigation and investment priorities, and given the citizen science volunteers confidence that their data gathering is having an active and beneficial impact on the condition of the river.

The creation of robust data sets through the project has also engaged local universities with the river – with benefits in terms of undergraduate and post graduate investigations and theses as well as academic reviews of project outcomes. All of this activity has also helped to raise the profile of the River Crane across London.

Largely in response to this work, Thames Water has recently invested £3m in a five year programme of catchment wide improvements, known as the Smarter Water Catchment programme. This is being delivered in partnership with the Crane Valley CIC and a network of local third sector, public and private organisations and is intended to be transformational to the value of the river and its open spaces.

The most remarkable fact is that the volunteers, many of whom started the process seven years ago, continue to go to their parts of the river every month to assess its condition. One of our biggest findings through eighteen years of activities with FORCE is that it is often the communities of volunteers that are the most consistent and longest lasting influences on any open space, long after the developers, politicians and others have moved on.

18. Failure is better than disengagement

Not all projects, or engagements with developers, lead to successful outcomes, and it is almost inevitable in any long term volunteer engagement to have periods of disillusionment. Maintaining an interest and a consistent message remains important though – particularly in situations where no-one else would become involved if we weren't - and the benefits are sometimes only derived several years after the initial engagement. The risk of disengagement is that, without local protection, a huge cumulative negative impact from neglect and subsequent development would follow.

One example of a long term benefit emerging came with the Duke's River pathway next to the English Rugby Union (RFU) national stadium. FORCE sought improvements to this narrow and little used pathway back in 2010, and took the case to a public inquiry in December of that year, with little obvious beneficial outcome. And yet, as a result of subsequently making the case at every planning opportunity, by 2017 the RFU agreed to provide the necessary strips of land to enhance the pathway and provide the final link in an improved 4km river corridor linking the River Crane to the River Thames, and in 2019 the enhanced riverside path was finally opened.

19. A voluntary group has no institutional power but can have great influence

An important feature of a voluntary organisation is its soft power and influence. It is critical to learn how to nurture and grow influence, with the general public and key decision makers, whilst maintaining true to the objects and values of the organisation. It is often difficult to measure this influence in each case and thereby know how to use it appropriately – this comes with experience, lots of debate and review, and the application of gut instinct.

20. Consistency and simplicity of message is key

Do not be distracted into areas which are not allied to the overall objectives of the organisation. This is why we always come back to how any initiative will affect the environmental and community value of the Crane valley.

21. One advantage of organisations like FORCE is our ability to be wrong

Many organisations feel they can only make definitive and ground-truthed statements of fact. We are able to also develop suitably caveated models and explanations that fit the facts that are available to us and then put these into the public domain to assess the reaction and response of others who may have more knowledge – which, for whatever reasons, they are not sharing. This approach, producing scenarios, testing them by sharing and then adapting and developing them with reference to the feedback received, allows the sum total of shared knowledge to grow in important ways – by not being afraid to be wrong.

This paper may be an example of this process. It is not definitive, it has grown through an iterative process, and actively seeks the inputs and amendments of others in order to develop our shared knowledge and understanding.

22. Once an open space is lost it is lost, not for ever, but for generations

This is what makes every intervention, where developments are proposed on open spaces adjacent to the river, so critical. Conversely, virtually every open space in an urban area has been built upon or used at some point in its history – they are almost all brownfield sites. Until 150 years ago the River Crane corridor contained virtually the only industrial sites in this part of west London, developed there to take advantage of the available water supply and hydropower, and now it is one of the capital's few extensive green corridors.

The argument that a site can be developed because it was previously brown field would lead to the loss of most of the green space in London if taken to its logical conclusion. Conversely, every brown field site represents an opportunity for more open space in the capital.

23. Anti-social behaviour may be contagious but so too is pro-social behaviour

One of the first things we noticed when engaging with open spaces, is that litter breeds more litter and graffiti more graffiti. However, as we started to clear up sites it became evident that each clear up day at a site required less work than the last. With time, the exercise of pro-social behaviour also starts to kick in, whereby the local community as a whole take a form of ownership and pride in their park, and some people start to pick up a certain amount of other peoples' rubbish during their daily walk. We are encouraging this by giving away free litter pickers to any local person who wants one.

In all cases it is a matter of momentum, moving the condition and value of a site in the right direction. This is one reason why small and cumulative actions are better than one major intervention – as the former approach allows better control of the momentum around the site and the latter risks creating a peak from which it can only fall.

24. Politicians – and how to engage with them

Politicians are useful allies and dangerous enemies. They are adept at taking credit for things of value that have been achieved and it is important to let them do this – as their involvement indicates there is considerable potential for public buy in to the project.

Avoid political conflict if at all possible. One of the benefits of small scale and cumulative actions is that they can largely operate below the political radar. However, on occasion it is necessary to engage politicians in a project in order to deliver a larger initiative. In these cases always try to achieve buy in across the political spectrum. If the project becomes a political football it may be better to walk away and preserve energy for other more productive tasks.

25. Sustainability is key – for the Objects but not for the organisation

Charities are created to improve a situation or to resolve a problem, as defined in their Objects. It should therefore follow that a Charity will actively seek a time when this situation or problem is no longer an issue and their services are no longer required. When this happens a charity may evolve its Objects, though it is then essentially no longer the same organisation, as its core purpose will have changed.

In practice there are two types of charities – those that seek to manage the problem set out in their Objects and those that seek to develop the capacity for this problem to be managed by the wider community. FORCE seeks to be the latter kind of charity – we will step in where there is a problem or issue that could be improved, in line with our Objects, and where there is no other party available to do so. However, we also actively seek to develop the capacity of the wider community so that the ongoing management of the problem or issue can be sustained by us all. The ultimate objective is for FORCE to be no longer needed as we all (including the statutory agencies) provide the necessary services through our own efforts.

For more information about FORCE, Crane Valley CIC, Crane Valley Partnership and the River Crane see www.force.org.uk and www.cranevalley.org.uk
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