

## **Water safety and public liability**

### **Case study ~ Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve, Cheshire**

#### **Background**

Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve, formerly Brereton Heath Country Park, was created from a redundant former silica sand quarry by Congleton Borough Council in 1982. The site occupies eighty five acres and includes woodland, remnant lowland heath, and a fifteen acre lake. The lake was created by quarrying operations, and is up to thirteen metres deep. There are shallows and, in some places, steeply graded sides.

The facility has been managed by Cheshire County Council Countryside Management Service since its opening.

During ten years of dereliction prior to purchase, the site attracted unofficial use for swimming, and water activities. After being designated as a country park, this use increased dramatically, creating a culture of misuse. Although never condoned by either site owners or managers, visitors would travel up to twenty miles, attracted by what they perceived to be a substitute to a visit to the sea-side.

The carrying capacity of the facility was frequently exceeded. A hot summer Sunday would regularly result in a full car park of one hundred vehicles, supplemented by up to two hundred parked in local lanes. Litter, vandalism, and offensive behaviour, not only absorbed scarce resources in terms of staff time and finance, it also had a detrimental affect on other visitors, as well as local residents. Those wishing to visit to walk, and to experience the countryside, altered their visiting times to avoid the site at peak periods, or even for the whole of the summer.

Although Brereton Heath displayed 'Dangerous water; No swimming' signs at prominent positions from its opening, these were largely ignored. The high numbers using the water reinforced the swimming culture, beyond the control of staff. Visitors often believed that swimming must be legitimate, as so many people did it. Staff would even find young children left by their parents for the day, in order to go swimming, or to play with inflatable boats.

In addition to warning signs, handouts were produced, detailing the inherent dangers of the water. Staff would approach swimmers to explain the dangers. They would invariably be met with dismissal, or even by abuse or threats. Several serious incidents due to swimming were recorded.

A decision to deal with the problems, and to change the culture of the site, was taken in the early 1990's.

## **'Soft engineering' changes to discourage swimming**

The key to controlling the misuse has been the adoption of 'soft engineering', to discourage and restrict access to the lake.

One of the main attractions for sunbathers and swimmers was the presence of three sand banks at the lake edge, which acted as 'beaches'. These areas have been fenced off, covered in top-soil, and planted with a mix of indigenous trees. Alder was found to be the most suitable species, due to its ease of establishment, and tolerance to drought. Two of these areas now form a bird reserve.

The first 'beach' was allowed to establish before work commenced on the second. This allowed vegetation to establish undisturbed by the public.

One 'soft engineering' idea which met with problems has been an attempt to establish reed beds, both as habitat, as well as a further barrier to discourage access to the lake. This is attributed to a lack of nutrients in the water for plant growth, a lack of ability to control water levels, and to the grazing of reeds by waterfowl.

Efforts are continuing, and some success has been gained by the planting of greater reedmace, as this has been less prone to grazing than the phragmites originally used. Experiments are also taking place with floating nesting platforms, but care has been needed not to create a new target for swimmers.

## **Organised water activities**

Although canoeing is a recognised activity, providing a facility for local clubs, it is closely regulated by the sale of permits. Applicants must adhere to strict conditions of use; provide a risk assessment, evidence of insurance cover, and use safety equipment. Canoeing is prevented at peak periods so as not to encourage others into the water.

## **Introduction of 'pay and display' parking charges**

The introduction of 'pay and display' parking has helped in that visitors appear more likely to respect a facility for which they have had to pay. In the early days of its introduction, it was apparent that those swimming or misusing the reserve would be more likely not to have purchased a parking ticket. The issuing of penalty payment tickets has helped to reinforce positive behaviour.

## **Success of changes**

Within a few years, visitors' perceptions of the facility changed totally. People no longer perceive the site as somewhere to swim. The groups of youths who

dominated in the past have been replaced by families, and others seeking quiet countryside recreation.

Even on the hottest days, it is now rare for staff to need to speak to anyone regarding swimming. When this does occur, swimmers are quick to leave. In the past swimmers were determined to continue as so many others were also in the water. Now they feel 'out of place'.

A new 'visitor profile' has developed. Family groups tend to dominate at busy periods, with the focus of recreation now being away from the water body.

Allied to other changes, particularly the promotion of wildlife and habitat through improved interpretation, and the provision of environmental arts, the public perception of the facility has become much more positive. Resources have been freed to improve both facilities and habitat, to cater for educational visits, and develop community involvement opportunities. One example of this is a resident coppice craft group, who provide life-long learning opportunities, and create outdoor environmental art sculptures, sometimes with local schools' involvement.

Adoption of 'Local Nature Reserve' status, in 2005, has been followed by the awarding of the Civic Trust 'Green Flag Award' in 2007. A visitor survey carried out by Cheshire County Council in 2006 found a 100% satisfaction rating from 1000 people questioned. The changes and improvements to the nature reserve featured strongly in visitors comments.



During the 1980s and early 1990s, it was common for visitors to use the lake for swimming, inflatable craft, etc.



A decision was made to topsoil the sandy lake side areas. These areas were then fenced, and planted with an alder dominated mix of trees.



Within a few years, the character of the lakeside dramatically altered. Alder saplings proved resilient to dry periods, with rapid growth rates.



This warning sign, now surrounded by dense tree cover, was formerly surrounded by open sand.



The eastern end of the lake in 2008, with the so-called 'beach' areas now transformed into a bird reserve.

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