

Context: Poeke Park is situated near Poeke, a small village in the municipality of Aalter in East Flanders, Belgium. Within the park, there is a castle completely surrounded by water, set in 56 hectares of parkland. The castle has a long history, and there have been fortifications on the site dating back to the 12th century. The castle had been owned by the aristocracy until the last Baroness died in 1955 when the castle was donated, along with the park, to a foundation for orphans. By 1977, it was proving very difficult for the foundation to maintain the castle and the park due to the very high costs. The municipality of Aalter purchased Poeke when it was in very poor condition and began the process of rebuilding and re-landscaping. Events (e.g. heritage and parks days) attract nationwide visitors. On a day-to-day basis, schools and local residents are the main park users.

The park was designated a landscape heritage site in the late 1970s. This was subject to legal conditions which required a long-term management be drawn up which was done in 2003, alongside the formation of a place-keeping committee for the park. To address the challenge of park management, the place-keeping committee drew up one management plan to cover a 24-year period, made up of two plans each covering a 12-year period. This involved detailed surveys and analysis of the site. Specific aspects of the site were given special attention, particularly trees as there is a long-standing tradition of tree management.



All decisions made on-site are made according to the **management plan** focused on the aesthetic and historic context of the site. The plan is dynamic and flexible to learn from practice where relevant. Planning of place-keeping activities is arranged over the long term with some aspects (historic, castle, meadows) focused on different time scales.

The **management committee** is made up of a range of stakeholders. Alongside representatives from the municipality, which include the Environmental Officer and the Mayor, stakeholders include landowners, land users (e.g. farmers who use the land for grazing), representatives from the Flemish government agencies who monitor forest heritage and local community associations.

There has long been a tradition of **community participation** with local residents taking part in low-level maintenance of Poeke Park, initiated by residents. This would mainly involve the strategic felling of trees and removal of wood for personal use. By 2000-02, more expertise was required to ensure the safety of volunteers. The incentive of firewood remains but is much more closely organized and controlled. From 2006 onwards, volunteer numbers have increased to approximately 120 per day (rising from 30-35 in the late 1990s).



Funding: The initial costs, including renovations to the castle amounted to €3m while the site as a whole requires an annual €100,000 to cover maintenance costs. Public access to the park is free and daily. Funding comes from a combination of municipality funds. There is no tendering process as it is all done in-house by the municipality of Aalter. The costs savings to the municipality as a result of the volunteering activities are substantial: overall, around €20, 000 is saved every year. The long-term aim of running the estate is to bring as much income into the estate as feasibly possible.

'Place-keeping' challenges and lessons learned

The development of the volunteering days has been a success. While the success of the volunteering has been unprecedented, it is perceived as a novel approach which is rewarding and time-intensive.

There is some conflict between people who believe the access to the park should be limited because of its ecological qualities and others who believe the park should be open to the public to a certain extent or even as much as possible. It is the role of the Environmental Officer to act as a bridge between these two groups.

Specialist knowledge has been critical to assuring that only damaged or old trees were felled, and replanting has occurred in a well-organised manner, with much attention focused on the protection of the park landscape.

In the first year, the volunteer engagement was perceived as time-consuming and naive by other woodland managers in the area. Their perspectives have changed dramatically over time in light of the large numbers of volunteers at Poeke Park. The park is now considered an example of innovation and best practice.

