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# MP4 WP1.3 Transnational Assessment of Practice

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Poeke Park, Aalter.

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**The Interreg IVB  
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### Poeke Park: introduction

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. Poeke Park is owned and managed by the municipality of Aalter.

### Context

The village of Poeke is one of the smallest in the municipality of Aalter. The municipality comprises the towns of Aalter proper, Bellem, Lotenhulle, Maria-Aalter



Location of the municipality of Aalter with Belgium.

and Poeke. It is bordered to the north by Knesselare, to the east by Zomergem and Nevele, to the south by Deinze, and to the west by the province of West Flanders. The castle has a long history, and there have been fortifications on the site dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The castle had been owned by the aristocracy until the last Baroness died in 1955 and 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. The castle is not a suitable venue for private functions because the building would need further renovation: it is highly unlikely that this will be carried out because of the considerable expense. It is however open for educational purposes and cultural activities, and to that end is undergoing a long and ongoing period of low-level restoration.

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.

### Place-keeping by management plan

The park in its current state is a late 19th century estate with some remnants from the 18th century and a hunting ground which dates back to the Middle Ages. The park was designated a landscape heritage site in the late 1970s. This was subject to legal conditions (also discussed in the Policy section), which



The approach to Poeke Castle.



Poeke Castle and moat.

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 (one that had been encountered before 2000), 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.

Before embarking on the management plan, the site was surveyed, historical and cartographic data was brought together and a full analysis was carried out. An inventory was conducted out on all the lanes and tracks running through the site, which form an important part of the long-term management of the park.



The site analysis shows that the 56 hectares of land are broken down as follows:

- Lanes, roads (with rows of trees): 4.6ha
- Forests with coppiced woods: 31.6ha
- Meadows and grazing land: 13.7ha
- Gardens, water and parkland: 6.1ha

A field study was conducted to measure biodiversity and species richness in the park. The oldest forest area (pre-19th century) is found in the areas immediately surrounding the castle while the 'newer' forest (19th century onwards) is found on the outskirts of the park. For example, those trees considered the most valuable are left to grow, but care is taken to make sure there is not encroachment onto the lanes and footpaths. Also, grazing animals (sheep were noted) are used to keep the footpath

free of vegetation.

Once the inventory was completed, the place-keeping committee faced the challenge of how to create a document that provided the right focus on a range of aspects in the park.



#### **Specific aspects of the management plan:**

Attention was focused on the management aims and objectives which were given priority. The objectives of the management plan are:

- **The castle:** to be restored in 19th century style and to become a socio-cultural destination for small concerts and cultural events;
- **Castle grounds:** restore the coach house in 19th century style with an educational function;
- **Farm:** use this for grazing cattle as part of the place-keeping and land management process;
- **Park buildings:** maintain them and retain particular features in need of restoration, such as the dog kennels, bridges, gas lighting system and archaeological digs;

- **Water:** this is very important in this area of a small valley. An integrated water management system involves water storage capacity, involves the castle moat and other managed watercourses;
- **Other restoration building projects:** these include the kitchen, kitchen garden wall and the French and English gardens;
- **Lanes and roads:** to be maintained and retained according to 19th century methods with some focus on 18th century methods also. A restoration programme has been established to protect them.

There is no scope for machinery on site because access is limited so maintenance and landscaping has to be low impact and has to be by hand.

### Focus on trees

There is a long-standing tradition of tree management in the park – the Baron of Poeke (1741-82) kept 6 volumes of “How to look after trees on the Champs-Élysées” In 2002, an inventory was conducted to examine the extent of lost **trees** because some of the lanes have lost up to 40% of their trees and therefore had to be prioritized for maintenance.

Over 60% of the lanes had a loss of trees at such a rate that the place-keeping committee decided that mass replacement and



maintenance efforts on all the lanes was required.



Maintenance is phased to minimize the impact on the ecosystem at any one time. Tree species have not been randomly chosen but selected according to the local and historical context with the 18th century reflected in the use of oak and lime trees along the watercourses, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century with beech trees.

### Formal partnerships: the management committee

All decisions made on-site are made according to the management plan which is focused on the aesthetic and historic context of the site. The plan is dynamic and there is flexibility to learn from other examples and case studies in 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, which was formed in 2000, produces the management plan and oversees all the processes of management, planning and restoration and produces any other relevant documentation.

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. The committee meets twice a year.

**Community engagement: coppicing and volunteering in the forest**

There has long been a tradition of local residents taking part in low-level maintenance of Poeke Park, initiated by residents and not prompted by formal stakeholders. This would mainly involve the strategic felling of trees and removal of wood for personal use. When the Poeke Park management committee began to engage the volunteers (1996-99), this would involve 30-35 of volunteers coming on 3 days in the winter to work in small areas of the forest, with some refreshments provided by the Park staff. Wood was transported via wheelbarrows with the creation of many woodpiles in the forest and the use of a small-scale wood-chipping machine. This has developed into a much larger undertaking.



Volunteers felling trees.

By 2000-02, more expertise was required to ensure the safety of volunteers while working in the Park at all times. More refreshments were provided including hot drinks and soup and the mornings were spent explaining the management plan and why the volunteers were doing the specific place-keeping activities. As the numbers of volunteers has increased, so has the amount of wood which is now transported using the horses to a central wood-pile near the castle. 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 with ten farmers who bring 25 horses able to do extensive conservation work in 2 hectares over the year. Because it is more closely managed and organized, a wider range of activities can be completed, including replanting hedges, cleaning streams by hand and restoring the paths and French garden. These large-scale conservation efforts would not have been possible in the past with the uncoordinated, individual efforts of volunteers.

There is a working group of Poeke Park which is made up of volunteers. They organize the volunteering events, which include forest coppicing, and in the grasslands/ meadows, they have reverted to old management practices and grazing methods of the 18th-19th centuries.



Tree felling and conservation work.

This all involves large groups of volunteers who are attracted to the three annual volunteering days for a number of reasons. Farmers use the volunteer days and weekends to train their horses on-site and get them working when, day-to-day, farmers may not have

time to do this. Other volunteers give up their time as they are provided with an incentive of firewood from the felled trees to take home. Others may volunteer as it is an opportunity to catch up with friends and acquaintances and socialise in general, while others use it as an opportunity to do some physical work.



### Finance

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. The castle is only open for specific events which tend to be cultural and low-income.



Volunteers piling wood.

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 management plan that was created as part of the requirements for the legislation means that subsidies are provided for Poeke Park from the Flemish regional government. 80% of the castle costs are covered by subsidies. Every year, the Environmental Manager, together with the Landscape Manager, has to present a budget for the upkeep of Poeke Park to the municipality and, to date, this has never been questioned or refused.

The costs savings to the municipality as a result of the volunteering activities are substantial: overall, around €20, 000 is saved every year.

### Long-term aims in Poeke Park

The long-term aim of running the estate is to bring as much income into the estate as feasibly possible. Self-sufficiency is not feasible as the events that are put on but they are not high income-generating events. This is because the setting, particularly the castle, is too fragile for corporate and large-scale events.

### Policy

The legislation in place (and the requisite management plan) illustrates the policy support for the main place-keeping aims behind Poeke Park. The volunteering days are novel in the way that they are so popular and require a lot of behind-the-scenes organization which is often done in the Environmental Officer's free time, as it is not a high priority for the municipality. To ensure that volunteers are working safely, a number of changes had to be made in accordance with health and safety regulations.

### Valuation and evaluation

There was no real plan in place for the monitoring and evaluation of place-keeping activities. Monitoring happens in an informal, and unorganized way. This has led to the following conclusions about the place-keeping activities in the period 2000-2004:

- Noisy and big machines were not well-accepted by neighbouring residents in the village. It was considered that these machines did not fit into the park and damaged much of it;
- The safety of volunteers involved could not be guaranteed to a satisfactory standard, e.g. chopping down trees at the same time volunteers were working in the field had led to unsafe situations;
- The area which could be managed each year was too small to manage effectively the whole park within the 12-year management plan period;



Central wood-pile.

Therefore the approach has been adapted: more volunteers were mobilized to make more impact on the place-keeping activities to minimize noise and machinery. Also the place-keeping itself had to be organized better in order to ensure the safety of all volunteers. For example, now trees are cut one day before the “volunteer day”.

Since the installation of the management committee, to some extent the committee has begun

carrying out the monitoring and evaluation of the place-keeping activities.

### **Key factors for innovation and success**

The development of the volunteering days has been a success. In this way, the park is an example of best practice – the municipality’s Environmental Officer was invited to speak at an international governmental conference in Brussels in early 2010.

### **‘Place-keeping’ challenges**

While the success of the volunteering has been unprecedented, it is perceived as a novel approach which calls on much of the Environmental Officer’s free time. While this is rewarding, it is time-intensive. The municipality supports these activities by providing staff to manage the volunteer enrolment, control, supervision, traffic control and distribution of soup/ coffee etc. Nevertheless, a site-specific (higher) budget for the coordination of the place-keeping activities would be very useful.

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.

Another challenge encountered has been the problem of free-loading volunteers. It has already been outlined that when volunteers take part, they receive wood from the felled trees. This has led some participants to believe they can simply turn up and take the wood away without doing any work, or may even try to cheat by putting extra names on the volunteering list in an attempt to get extra wood. This is not tolerated and is closely managed by the Environmental Officer on the days. This has required more organization in the run-up to the volunteering days and that the Officer is on duty at all times on the days themselves, but it does mean that everyone who does take part is fully aware of the situation.

## Lessons learned

It can be argued that the management plan is too focused on plants and vegetation and not enough on people. The Environmental Officer argues that it is imperative to keep people and their different uses of the park and their different perspectives in mind throughout the management planning process.

It was clear that specialist knowledge is critical. Accessing such knowledge has meant 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 naïve by other woodland managers. Their perspectives have changed dramatically over time in light of the large numbers of volunteers at Poeke Park.

It is not clear if these long-term management techniques are replicated elsewhere even though Poeke Park is held up as an example of best practice.

## Format of this report

This report is based on the findings from a face-to-face in-depth interview carried out with the Environmental Officer, Municipality of Aalter, in 2010 who granted permission for MP4 members to use his responses in this report. This interview was semi-structured and conducted using the question schedule used in the data collection for all the case studies. The report also calls on a series of presentations which formed part of the Green Work(s)! conference in October 2010 by the Environmental Officer, Municipality of Aalter, the President of the Place-Keeping Committee, Poeke Castle and the Mayor of the Municipality of Aalter. Additional contextual data were sourced from various websites including: [www.belgium-mapped-out.com](http://www.belgium-mapped-out.com) and <http://www.belgiancastles.be/poeke.html> All photographs are reproduced with permission.

## Glossary

**'Place-making'**: creating high quality places that people want to visit, experience and enjoy. It implies a people-centred approach which emphasises designing spaces that promote health, wellbeing and happiness. Such spaces engender a sense of belonging and connection for those who use them.

**'Place-keeping'**: relates to maintaining the qualities and benefits – social, environmental and economic – of places through long-term management. The management required to maintain these qualities and benefits, the approach adopted and the timescale will depend on the 'place-making' aims, the available resources and the life span of the 'place'.

**Partnership**: is defined as agreed shared responsibility between public, private and community sectors. It is a relationship which, in this context, is normally formed between governmental and non-governmental sectors – i.e. it is a manifestation of governance relationships.

**Engagement**: is a cross-cutting issue which describes successful models of working with communities and encouraging appropriate use. Engagement is an aspect of governance particularly relevant in forms of participatory governance and is intrinsic to the concept of 'governance' as defined below.

**Governance**: relates to the relationship between and within government and non-governmental forces. The term implies wider participation in decision-making than representative democracy or other forms of government, recognising a wider range of actors other than the state, and allowing for varying governance contexts and processes.

**Finance**: describes financial models for efficient long-term management.

**Policy**: is discussed within the context of embedding best practice into spatial planning and other policy.

**Valuation**: describes the economic impacts of improvements to open spaces, but also relates to wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.