River Cole Summative Assessment Report

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

European Union
European Regional Development Fund

Contents

1. Project Context

1.1. Executive Summary

This report provides an independent evaluation forming the end point summative assessment for the River Cole and Tyseley Energy Park: Creation of Community Commons Project, as managed and delivered by the University of Birmingham (UoB) within the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) area.

The project was proposed in response to a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding call that was published in January 2020, relating to the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy: Greater Birmingham and Solihull (SUD Strategy).

The project has been delivered under Programme Priority Axis Six (PA6) which has the overarching aim of preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency. It was aligned to Investment Priority 6d (IP6d) which focuses on protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil and promoting ecosystems, including through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.

The project was designed to address several challenges that the River Cole Valley faced as identified within the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy and Cole Valley Catchment Landscape Vision Project and through wider stakeholder and community engagement. These challenges included the need to manage and develop sites to improve the quality of the public realm, amenity value and water quality and mitigate flood risk, and provide innovative design solutions to enable optimum, affordable solutions.

The project sought to address these challenges by delivering a programme of blue and green infrastructure improvement interventions in the Tyseley area of the River Cole Corridor. The activity was focused on habitat enhancements across the project area, connected by a programme of community-led wayfinding, planting and arts interventions. The facilitation of an integrated volunteer and resident engagement programme aimed to deliver environmental enhancements whilst ensuring all interventions were co-designed and informed by the local community, maximising sustainable long-term engagement with the project area.

The project commenced in October 2021 and has a project end date of June 2023 for both practical and financial completion.

1.2. Aims and Objectives of the Assessment

This report and the evaluation methodology underpinning it were designed in accordance with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) guidance on conducting end point summative assessments. Additional client requirements for specific insights in order to support future local delivery have been considered and included.

The key objectives of the evaluation will be to understand:

- The continued relevance, rational and consistency of the project
- The progress of the project against contractual targets
- The experience of delivering and managing the project
- The economic and social impact attributable to the project
- The cost-effectiveness of the project and its Value for Money (VFM)
- Recommendations to improve operational delivery, beneficiary experience and outcomes

Additional objectives of the evaluation will include:

- The levels of engagement with and impact of the project upon the local community and the creation of a Community Commons to continue the long term maintenance and governance of the benefits realised by the project
- Surveys of projects to capture insights and feedback, including the development of case studies
- Gaining economic insights to inform future opportunities, challenges and developments

1.3. Methodology

The evaluators sought to deploy a mixed method approach to provide a means of collecting qualitative and quantitative data via an overarching data collecting framework that mapped out the project's outcomes. An inception meeting was held to confirm the approach, agree principal milestones and discuss the development of the project, providing evaluators with insights into the project's context and original rationale.

A desk review of the local area, the environmental and socioeconomic factors and challenges it faces and the strategic context was undertaken. A qualitative component explored staff and partner experiences of delivering and managing the projects and an exploration of the projects that delivered the contracted improvements. Quantitative data was explored by means of confirmed project outputs and outcomes, and additional research was undertaken through case studies, and direct questionnaire engagement with individual project staff and members of the overarching Project Management Board. The assessment has endeavoured to highlight what might have happened in the absence of the intervention in a qualitative sense and to grant a wider understanding and assessment of the delivery approach of the project, particularly during challenging delivery periods, with direct comparison to similar projects and includes recommendations for future delivery and options.

Further research was undertaken through the Value For Money Guide created by People in Need to measure project and social impact.

The review has been conducted and concluded to ensure compliance with funding requirements.

1.4. Headline Findings

Due to the contracted works due to complete by the end of the project, The River Cole Project will deliver 100% of the profiled outputs and evidenced the capability of UoB to deliver projects aimed at environmental preservation and habitat rehabilitation.

- Whilst 0% of the total surface area of rehabilitated land (C22) and surface area of habitats supported (C23) have been claimed as outputs, there is not an underperformance as the agreed profile with the funding body anticipates all outputs will be claimed in the final quarter (Q2 2023)
- Based on the contracted capital works packages and their evidence to date of works completed, 100% of the outputs will be claimed
- The project was extensively scoped prior to the submission of the full application, with support from local agencies and the Council to identify key areas for improvement and ensure the technical expertise was in place to advise on the appropriate improvements
- Without this funding, the Ackers weir removal would not have been able to go ahead; this project was identified as a requirement by the Environment Agency years prior and had been lobbied for, but was not a priority due to lack of Council funding and it not being a flood risk
- The project was well managed with an understanding from the UoB Project Delivery Team that successful stakeholder management was imperative and through conversation with the PDT, it was evident that strong relationships had been built and opportunities for collaboration were maximised
- The community engagement was a key success factor of the project, demonstrating exceptional value to the local residents that cannot be measured through outputs
- The project demonstrates future thinking with the development of the Community Commons Stewardship framework, ensuring the legacy of the project has a lasting impact
- A trusted pool of suppliers with an appetite to deliver more works packages has been developed in the area, building a solid foundation for future funding and improvements

1.5. Context for the Review

The GBSLEP area lies at the heart of the country and is made up of 9 Local Authority areas. It has a combined population of 1.3million with the city of Birmingham acting as the central economic hub. It was identified within the 2016 SUD Strategy that GBSLEP lags behind other LEPs in terms of commitment and actions on climate change adaptation and has limited strategic overview of combined biodiversity and green infrastructure needs, hence the call for projects to enhance this.[1]

Tyseley is a district located in the city of Birmingham. It was historically known for its industrial heritage, particularly in relation to railway engineering with Tyseley Locomotive Works being a significant facility in the past. Today, Tyseley is characterised by a mix of residential, industrial,

[1] 2016 SUD Strategy (GBSLEP)

and commercial areas, both urban and rural. Manufacturing has been a dominant sector with historic companies still in the area today, including The British Small Arms Company (BSA) factory, which over the last 100 years has manufactured ammunition and automotives. Webster and Horsfall, who own Tyseley Energy Park, have been manufacturing steel products in the area for the last 300 years. The Grand Union Canal runs through the district as does the River Cole, which flows for 25 miles and throughout the wider West Midlands region.

The River Cole is situated within a significant area of green infrastructure between East Birmingham, North Solihull and North Warwickshire. The area contains major transport infrastructure with the existing motorway network and future HS2 route passing through the river valley. The River Cole Corridor includes various towns and communities, including other local districts such as Yardley and Acocks Green. It features a diverse range of habitats, including wetlands, meadows and woodlands, providing a haven for a wide array of wildlife. The river supports a rich ecosystem, with species such as kingfishers, herons, otters and various fish species calling it home.

The River Cole Corridor also provides a greenspace for local residents and visitors to enjoy activities such as walking, cycling, and fishing. Several parks and nature reserves are situated along it, offering amenities and spaces for relaxation and outdoor pursuits.

However, maintaining and preserving blue and green infrastructure can be difficult considering the following environmental challenges:

- **Flood risk:** The nature of the river corridors can pose a risk of flooding. This can cause damage to both habitats and infrastructure, whilst also posing a risk to human safety.
- **Soil erosion:** Agricultural use can lead to soil erosion, which can result in problems such as decreased soil fertility and water pollution.
- **Habitat loss and fragmentation:** The expansion of urban areas and agricultural land use can lead to the loss and fragmentation of natural habitats, which can result in a decline in the populations of some species that rely on these habitats for survival.
- **Climate change:** Climate change is causing changes in temperature and precipitation patterns, which can impact the distribution and survival of species. Climate change can also affect food availability and migration patterns, which can further impact biodiversity.
- **Pollution:** Pollution, such as air and water pollution, can have significant impacts on the health of plant and animal species, by negatively impacting their reproductive success, growth, and overall health.
- **Lack of awareness and education:** A lack of awareness and education about the importance of biodiversity and the threats it faces can make it challenging to conserve and protect species.

The relationship between the human population and the environment is a complex one as whilst promotion of the wider sustainability agenda is improving, the interactions between the two have increased in recent years due to factors such as urbanisation. Balancing economic growth without degrading ecosystems and their services is a challenge and one that needs to be addressed in order to ensure a sustainable future for the area.

Ecosystem services are the benefits that the human population gains from the natural environment when ecosystems are functioning properly. When doing so, ecosystems such as forest ecosystems and aquatic ecosystems can provide benefits that are often integral to the provision of clean drinking water, the decomposition of wastes and the natural pollination of crops and other plants.

In 2011, the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA) was conducted which was the first large scale independent and peer reviewed assessment and analysis of the UK's natural environment in terms of the benefits afforded to society and the UK's continuing economic prosperity.[2]

The assessment identified eight broad habitat types from which ecosystem services are derived. Relevant to this project are "**Urban**", "**Woodlands**" and "**Freshwaters**":

- **Urban** (suburban and urban habitats, consisting of built structures and other infrastructure) ecosystem goods and services that could potentially be derived from greenspace are substantial, but greenspace within urban areas is not systematically monitored. Without such basic data the ecosystem services cannot be quantified. However, access to Urban greenspace is essential for good mental and physical health, childhood development, social cohesion and other important cultural services. During the last three decades of the 20th Century, there was a decline in the condition and accessibility of Urban greenspace in the UK and as of 2011, the amount of mean accessible greenspace was 2ha per 1,000 people in England. Deprived areas systematically fare worse in terms of quantity and quality of greenspace.
- **Woodlands** (managed plantations, ancient, semi-natural woodlands both coniferous and deciduous) provide an important range of ecosystem services and associated goods and benefits, such as timber, soil protection, amenity and biodiversity. In recent decades, there has been a shift in forestry policy and practice with the adoption of the principle of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) for multiple benefits. Woodlands are managed as a resource for people, providing timber, wood products, recreation, amenities and well-being, as well as being managed for the benefit of local wildlife. Additionally, Woodlands are highly valued by people for social and cultural services. The social and environmental benefits of woodlands in Great Britain (GB) with recreational visits valued at £484 million in 2010. However, only 55% of the population has access to woods larger than 20ha within 4 km of their home.

- **Freshwaters** (rivers, lakes, ponds, groundwaters and wetlands) provide major and significant services but their benefits are inadequately identified and valued, resulting in habitat losses that are among the fastest in the UK. An optimally functioning freshwater habitat should provide consumptive and non-consumptive uses of water, organisms for food, and regulate flooding, erosion, sedimentation, and water quality. They have significant cultural value for recreation, tourism, education, heritage and as inspiration for arts and religion. Almost all freshwater systems in the UK have been affected by human

[2] UK NEA Assessment

activity, including drainage, changes in land cover and atmospheric deposition, and most are now managed to a greater or lesser extent. As of 2011, less than 1% of the UK's entire river length are part of formal protection networks. For wetlands, floodplains and catchments ecosystems, there is a need for improved inventory and assessment, including the ecosystem services and benefits they currently, or could potentially, provide.

The restoration of ecosystems can maximise and reap the benefits of the ecosystem services they provide, whilst also providing cost-effective solutions to the enhancement of key services such as flood risk reduction and water quality improvement.

1.6. Proposed Project Summary and Delivery

The overarching aim of the proposed project was to rehabilitate underutilised urban, greenspace areas into an accessible and connected green corridor in East Birmingham, providing opportunity for increased biodiversity, economic and community activity. The combination of large and small, partner, contractor and community delivered interventions would create a whole place ecosystem across the project area that would draw in residents as well as creating new habitats for plants, animals and insects.

The proposed project was researched to ensure it aligned with the shared plans of:

- **GBSLEP –** Sustainable Urban Development Strategy: Greater Birmingham and Solihull
- **Birmingham City Council –** East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Strategy
- **Environment Agency –** Cole Valley Catchment Landscape Vision Project

UoB sought out the collaboration of The Environment Agency, Birmingham City Council, Sport England and The Active Wellbeing Society to form a collaborative funding partnership and match fund and deliver a programme of works along the river corridor. In addition, the project proposed to create a stakeholder group that meets quarterly to discuss what is happening on the project and to receive feedback. This includes local Councillors, organisations, companies and charities.

In terms of measurable outputs, the proposal included the rehabilitation of 55ha of public open space, making it available for community and biodiversity activity and improving its community value.

Additionally, the proposal including the enabling of 37ha of public open space to attain a better conservation status through river and woodland enhancement activities and access improvements.

The proposal intended to achieve this in the following three project areas:

- Ackers Adventure/Lost World (Ackers to Grand Union Canal)
- Tyseley Park/Lost World (Grand Union Canal to A45)
- The River Cole Catchment to Kingfisher Park (A45 to Hob Moor Road)

The project proposed to carry out a variety of activities to achieve this. Specific activities included:

1. **Restoring and enhancing natural capital**

The project would open-up woodlands, focussing on the Tyseley Park Lost World area by carrying out thinning and coppicing of dense tree cover. These initial works would allow seeding and planting of native ground flora species such as bluebell, foxglove, red campion and ramsons by volunteer groups.

2. **Managing bankside trees and woodland**

Mature trees and woodlands alongside watercourses contribute to habitat diversity and can have a positive impact on water quality through sustaining riverbanks in times of heavy flow from erosion and collapse. However, in the project area there were areas where trees and associated vegetation had become densely packed and created shaded conditions, reducing habitat quality, and encouraging antisocial behaviour and fly tipping, creating an area that feels unsafe to the local communities. Smaller trees and shrubs would be coppiced and thinned to reduce shade, and along with scrub clearance will allow the watercourses to become more visible and accessible to users of the cycle/foot path and surrounding green space, creating more open habitat conditions for different species.

3. **Invasive species control**

The project activities would include control of invasive species – mainly Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam in the Tyseley Park/Lost World area by the River Cole and Grand Union Canal. These are not native UK species, and because of the size and rapid growth of Japanese Knotweed in particular, are able to out-compete native plant species along watercourse corridors. This reduces the amount of suitable habitat for native insects, birds and mammals. When it dies back in winter leaving bare ground, this can lead to an increase in soil erosion affecting water quality due to run-off and sediment deposition. This leaves an area unable to fully achieve its native conservation quality. A programme of invasive species control would be established to improve habitat quality and accessibility as well as making space available for biodiversity activity and a source of local natural capital.

4. **Enhancing the canal and river banksides**

To improve the habitat diversity and connectivity along the River Cole and the Grand Union Canal, a programme of activity would be delivered by Canal and Rivers Trust (CRT) volunteer groups to remove litter from the bankside and watercourses with the aim of supporting improvements to habitat quality throughout the project area.

5. **River improvements**

Man-made structures such as weirs along the River Cole create obstructions and prevent natural processes, which inhibit the movement of fish and other aquatic wildlife as well as having an adverse impact on the watercourse's function and ecological quality. The project would remove a weir on the River Cole by Ackers Adventure. This would allow the watercourse

channel to re-naturalise and improve habitat connectivity for aquatic wildlife. The project will look to fully remove the concrete structure to restore the River Cole back to its natural state.

6. **River re-naturalisation works**

Under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) the River Cole was failing to meet Good Ecological Status (GES), primarily due to urban diffuse pollution and physical modification. The outcome of the project would be an improved and more resilient environment along this part of the river, which would help in progressing towards achieving Good Ecological Status in the River Cole waterbody. Areas directly along the water bank and scalloped areas along the bank side would be reduced to water level to create marginal shelves and marshy grassland habitats. Between the scalloped areas, the banks would be regraded to create variation in the bank slope and wildflower rich grassland and willow scrub habitat will be created. Planting would provide improve insect, plant and animal biodiversity and protect banks from erosion, by providing a natural filter for sources of pollution and slowing high water flows.

7. **Access improvements**

Research and engagement with the local community has identified that the area was underutilised as a route for commuting and travel through the area, or as a green space for leisure and physical activity. Alongside the environmental improvements to woodland, grassland and river habitats to open up of the area, the project would improve the habitat for citizens by creating a new area of green public space on the cycle/foot path to connect the cycle path and river to the local community. There would also be activities to replace areas of cycle/foot path and introduce security by design measures such as lighting, mirrors and signage in identified areas. A community-led programme of wayfinding interventions across the whole project area such as Sahri Walks and arts trails would highlight and connect the improved green and blue infrastructure across the project area, and to nearby parks, community assets and active travel infrastructure.

8. **Develop and activate the project area common space**

A coordinated programme of co-designed activities with the local community would deliver wayfinding and small-scale tactical urbanism in the three project main areas, including planting, urban farming, creation of nature walks and creation of biodiversity activity areas. These activities will be part of the process of making the space available for community, biodiversity and economic activity. The largest intervention to activate a common space in the project area for the community would be the development of a public open space seating area in the Tyseley Park/Lost World area connected to the adjacent cycle/foot path. Involving residents in the design and delivery of these interventions alongside strategic partners such as the council and the Environment Agency (EA) would be part of a knowledge generation process of building the skills and knowledge to take on the long-term management of the River Cole and Tyseley Community Commons.

Biodiversity Benefits of Proposed Activities:

- Improved habitat structural diversity and increased diversity of marginal and aquatic plant species along watercourses, reducing shade and improving habitat suitability for water vole, dragonflies and damselflies, pollinating insects.
- Improved habitat quality, naturalness and connectivity for aquatic species such as fish, including Brown Trout, Bullhead and sticklebacks and aquatic invertebrates by removing the man-made obstruction from the River Cole.
- Improved habitat connectivity for terrestrial species by increasing the extent and quality of semi-natural habitat through new planting and management to improve habitat diversity.
- Reduction in the extent of invasive species (Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam) along the River Cole, improving habitat diversity and enabling re-introduction of native species.
- The project would also improve accessibility to existing green and blue space by creating a more attractive and safer environment along the cycle foot path network and by creating a new public open space for residents and workers.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Proposed Activities:

- Improvements to the cycle path, introducing innovative wayfinding, lighting and security by design measures that are complimentary to the area as a nature and green space.
- Clearance of dense vegetation and opening out of the land between the cycle path and the River Cole would contribute to reducing anti-social behaviour, as well as increasing opportunities leisure and physical activities to improve health and well-being outcomes for local communities.
- The project would also provide education opportunities for local community members and school children through the development of specific sites for urban farming schemes, meadow creation, forest schools and natures trails.

The combined project activities would rehabilitate an area of land which is underutilised by the local community and where there is little formal management intervention (particularly the Ackers and Tyseley Park Lost World area). Aesthetic improvements co-designed and delivered by residents and community members across the project area would reduce anti-social behaviour, improve safety and create a community commons to be owned and managed by the community for their social and economic benefit.

1.7. Proposed Finances and Outputs

As noted in Chapter 1.6, the proposed project was formed on the basis of a collaborative agreement with relevant local partners. The proposal sought **£620,018** of ERDF funding to deliver the scope of works over 2.5 years, bringing the total project budget to £1.24 million.

Proposed Expenditure in Project Application

Type	Category	Budget
Capital	Other Capital	£679,261
Capital	Fees	£20,000
		£699,261
Revenue	Salaries	£452,414
Revenue	Flat Rate Indirect Costs	£67,860
Revenue	Office Costs	£2,500
Revenue	Marketing	£8,000
Revenue	Professional Fees	£10,000
		£540,774
	Total Project Funding	**£1,240,035**

The financial profiles were thoroughly considered within the initial application with support from the delivery partners to estimate the costs for the works scoped. Costs for river enhancements work were estimated by the Environment Agency and the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country in a pre-works appraisal/opportunity mapping of the area, and costs for common space activation activities (contractors and equipment) were estimated by The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS) based on their experience of delivering these types of activities in East Birmingham.

Ongoing project costs including salaries were estimated by Birmingham City Council (BCC), UoB and TAWS using in-house finance tools to calculate the direct costs for salaried staff. Marketing and publicity costs were estimated by UoB based on costs for similar projects.

Cost mitigation was also demonstrated for larger interventions such as the Ackers Weir removal; if costs were to rise above the estimates, this could be mitigated by agreeing an alternative solution (e.g. bypass rather than removal), which whilst not the optimal solution, could be designed to deliver the output indicators.

Proposed Outputs in Project Application

Output	Output Name	Initial Bid
C22	Total surface area of rehabilitated land	55ha
C23	Surface area of habitats supported	37ha

The C22 output was calculated by assuming that the total surface area of space contained within the project boundary would be rehabilitated and improved through the project.

The C23 output was calculated based on the location of specific interventions sites identified within the three main project areas where habitat improvements would be introduced. Site visits, opportunity mapping and the knowledge of strategic partners of the project area determined habitat areas including woodlands, grasslands, water courses and banksides where habitat enhancements could be delivered that would enhance the environment for plants, aquatic species, mammals, humans and other animals.

The project interventions would create specific areas of habitat and environmental improvement that would be connected by a programme of smaller interventions delivered by TAWS to introduce project wide wayfinding and arts and educational installations and create a new ecosystem for residents and community members over the whole site.

2. Project Progress Against Finances and Outputs

A successful Project Change Request (PCR) was submitted in August 2022, one of two PCRs to be submitted throughout the project lifecycle. The primary aim of this PCR was to increase and reprofile expenditure due to inflation of costs.

The works in question were the Weir Removal and the River Renaturalisation, with both having their budgets increased. The UoB conducted an open tender for both packages with only one bid returning from one supplier. This bid gave figures of £330,421.55 for the Weir Removal (originally budgeted at £166,956) and £261,855.90 for the River Renaturalisation (originally budgeted at £57,115). As the Environment Agency had calculated that the Weir Removal was a more important package for the restoration of the river, the project decided to continue with this package of works and requested to remove the River Renaturalisation works to cover this vital Weir Removal package. Therefore, the Environment Agency also agreed to increase their match funding by £60,000 to cover this increase and around £43,000 from the River Renaturalisation works budget was needed to be reallocated to the Weir Removal. Without approval, the project would have been severely impacted as the Environment Agency would have withdrawn their match funding without the completion of the Weir Removal works package.

This brought the total project value to £1.49 million. As a result of the project value increase, the match funding contributions from partners also increased. Additionally the PCR included the contribution of land match from BCC and reprofiling occurred due to a change in value of the land match, as this could only be a maximum of 10% of the project value and therefore had to be decreased from the initial figure. UoB matched the shortfall this created. The actual match funding for the project is:

Partner	Match Funding
University of Birmingham	£174,477.87
The Active Wellbeing Society	£160,413.63
The Environment Agency	£210,000.00
Sport England	£60,000.00
Birmingham City Council	£143,127.50
Total Project Match Funding	**£748,019.00**

In March 2023, a PCR was submitted to the funding body to reprofile revenue expenditure for the primary rationale of high staff turnover at TAWS. The aim was to then subcontract some of their community and stewardship works to other organisations through UoB. The total revenue budget remained the same and this PCR was also accepted. No amendments were to the scale of outputs or timeframe of the project were requested through either of the PCRs.

Cost Category Profiles and PCR

Type	Category	Budget	PCR1	PCR2
Capital	Other Capital	£679,261	£799,261	£799,261
Capital	Fees	£20,000	£20,000	£20,000
Capital	Other Capital (Land Match)	£0	£136,003	£136,003
		£699,261	**£955,264**	**£955,264**
Revenue	Salaries	£452,414	£452,414	£383,414
Revenue	Flat Rate Indirect Costs	£67,860	£67,860	£57,512.10
Revenue	Office Costs	£2,500	£2,500	£1,636.37
Revenue	Marketing	£8,000	£8,000	£17,811.53
Revenue	Professional Fees	£10,000	£10,000	£80,400
		£540,774	**£540,774**	**£540,774**
	Total Project Funding	**£1,240,035**	**£1,496,038**	**£1,496,038**

Outputs Achieved to Q1 2023 and Forecast

Indicator	Targets		Performance at Time of Evaluation		Projected Performance at Project Closure		Overall Assessment
	Original	Adjusted	No.	% of Target	No.	% of Target	
Capital Expenditure	£699,261	£955,264	£527,036.20	55%	£955,264	100%	
Revenue Expenditure	£540,774		£304,062.26	56%	£440,000	81%	
C22: Total surface area of rehabilitated land	55ha		0ha	0%	55ha	100%	
C23: Surface area of habitats supported	37ha		0ha	0%	37ha	100%	

At point of evaluation, the project has achieved 0% of its intended outputs. However it must be made clear that this is not an underperformance as due to the agreed schedule of works, all outputs were anticipated to be achieved in Q2 2023. Based on the contracted works undertaken, the project has achieved 100% of its hectarage improvements and therefore will be claiming 100% of it's outputs.

Based on the committed expenditure due to be claimed, the project spend is forecasted to be 93% of the total budget with a slight underspend in revenue budget. Whilst this appears to be a slight underspend, it demonstrates value for money on this project due to the capital nature of the works completed and the 100% of the outputs being achieved. However it must be noted that due to the inflation costs and the consequent removal of the river re-naturalisation works, not all of the initial scoped works were able to be completed within the total budget.

3. Project Delivery and Management

At point of initial application, the UoB had prior experience of managing earlier ERDF projects such as the ATETA clean energy programme and built on this experience to manage and monitor this project. Existing tools were in place, including templates that had previously been used successfully to develop a Project Management Plan (PMP), marketing plan and risk register.

Within the initial application, the Project Delivery Team (PDT) was well considered and demonstrated consideration of capacity and responsibilities for each dedicated member of staff.

Supporting the governance and management of the project was the Project Management Board (PMB). This comprised of the UoB PDT and representatives from partners, including TAWS, the EA and BCC. The function of the PMB was to ensure that the project was managed efficiently and delivered successfully. The PMB met on a monthly basis to assess the project's progress and assess any risks or issues that may have. Whilst the project may have benefitted from a wider perspective, the key purposes of the PMB were still achieved.

The Project Manager's role was to ensure that the project was compliant with ERDF regulations and work closely with the Project Director and delivery staff to ensure the project remained within scope. In conversation with the PDT at UoB, it was evident that a process was in place to ensure compliant data collection through the collation of before and after photos or work being undertaken and ensuring this directly relating to the contract and purchase orders raised. Protocols were also in place to ensure timely and efficient data collection from contractors and no issues or challenges were noted with obtaining the required claim verification evidence.

In addition, there was the Project Steering Group (PSG) which was chaired by the Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer for the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the University of Birmingham. It met every six months, based on best practice shared by other ERDF Project Managers at UoB. The PSG consisted of the Chairperson, Head of Strategic Projects & Partnerships, Project Director and Project and Partnership Manager. The role of the PSG was to ensure the project had the adequate University support at a senior level and that the outcomes of the project were mainstreamed into the University priorities.

The collaboration with the wider strategic partnership was key to delivery, enabling opportunities for and encouraging communication, sharing of resource and activity. This was managed through the Project Stakeholder Group that met quarterly to update local organisations, charities, businesses and councillors.

Roles of the delivery partners were also well considered within the initial application, with a focus on communication and coordination between Council departments and contractors delivering the packages of works. The management of the relationship with BCC to ensure their ongoing support for project planning and design was critical, as various differing departments of BCC had the majority land-ownership/control for the project area. A timesheeted Project Support Officer was utilised to help build this relationship, enabling quicker and more effective communications with the right contacts. In conversation with the PDT at UoB, it was clear that at point of project inception, it was a challenge to locate and engage the most appropriate contacts, however the benefits of the PSO managing those relationships were reaped further along into project delivery. The internal communications with the East Birmingham Inclusive Growth Delivery Team were noted as a specific success.

Service Level Agreements were entered into between UoB and the match funding partners.

A baseline ecological survey was conducted at the start of the project with a post project ecological survey scheduled to evidence the area of space made available for biodiversity activities, as well as biodiversity improvements implemented through the project. BCC was responsible for the invasive species surveys and the EA responsible for the river-based surveys,

The project sought to obtain to count the number of people using the whole project area of land pre- and post-interventions. This will be obtained through research and engagement activity.

The strong focus on community led delivery of the interventions means that measuring community engagement across the project is a key indicator. The number of residents, community members and volunteers engaged on delivery of outputs, as well as recording the

change in the frequency of visitors to the project area over the course of the project has been recorded.

Cross Cutting Themes

UOB and the delivery partner BCC are committed to the sustainability agenda. The University makes a significant contribution to sustainable development, not only in its role as an internationally recognised provider of research and teaching, but also in the way it performs as a business and engages positively with the local and wider community. https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/environment/sustainability-highlights.pdf

As a civic university, they embrace their unique role in contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The goals are “the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.”

Key strategic BCC documents, including Vision 2020, Birmingham Green Commission’s Carbon Roadmap and the Birmingham Development Plan promote the principle of sustainable development throughout all Council activities. This approach is further promoted through Birmingham’s status as a “Biophilic City”.

As part of the procurement process, tenderers’ sustainability performance was assessed as part of the questions relating to Social Responsibility, as defined in the Birmingham Business Charter for Social Responsibility. This Charter covers six principles of social responsibility:

- Local Employment
- Buy Birmingham First
- Partners in Communities
- Good Employer
- Green and Sustainable and Ethical Procurement.
- The Active Wellbeing Society

TAWS supported the local community around the project site to engage, connect with and take ownership of their local greenspace, bringing it back into use and strengthening the area’s connections within the East Birmingham Corridor. This included contracting local cooperative Places in Common to explore models of governance co-ownership, brokering power between the local authority and the community who live in this area.

To achieve this, they drew on their networks in the community and health infrastructure, particularly their team of social prescribing link workers who are based in GP surgeries around the area. Through these networks they recruited and engaged local people, delivering a wide range of coproduced activities that met their needs while also introducing them to the local greenspace and assets within the community (e.g., through sensory walks, planting and small-scale public realm interventions).

In accordance with its Equalities and Diversity Policy and the provision of the Equality Act 2010, UoB is committed to a comprehensive policy of equal opportunities such that no beneficiary shall be treated any less favourably than any other. The operation of the equal opportunities policy is reviewed periodically as part of the planning process.

Particular attention was given in the project to encourage greater female participation across the associated sectors.

The University has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy. The University is an equal opportunity employer and fully committed to a policy of treating all of its employees equally. UoB took account of the disabilities of its stakeholders and made the necessary arrangements to ensure access to the benefits of the project alongside all the other participants e.g., availability of large print documentation and workshop venues with wheelchair access and induction loops.

4. Project Outcomes and Social Impact

Given the ecological nature of the programme, there are no specific **economic outputs** aligned to the proposal. However it can be argued that through the development and promotion of the local environment and ecosystem services, there will be some economic benefits. Whilst not easy to measure, the investment in blue and green infrastructure will be likely to support:

- Reduced healthcare costs by promoting and facilitating healthier and more active lifestyles
- Increasing the attractiveness of the area for inward investment
- Supporting property values by improvement of the area's image
- Specifically, a longer term aim that would not be captured and measured in the lifetime of the project is the creation of green jobs and skills opportunities e.g. planting, growing, maintenance and invasive species removal. In addition, the site is a living and provides a solid foundation for research and innovation conducted by Tyseley Energy Park and the University's Birmingham Energy Innovation Centre.

In terms of **environmental benefits**, the measure of habitat improvement is calculated in hectarage and verified through the claim data that must be presented by the programme to the Managing Authority. This includes:

- Where required planning permission from the local authority and/or an Environmental Permit from the Environment Agency
- Area plan detailing the boundaries and total surface area
- Before and after photographic evidence

Post-project ecological surveys have been conducted by the Environmental Agency to assess the impact on the ecosystems and biodiversity which will be measured against pre-project

surveys conducted at the inception of the project. The results of these surveys will be published and could be used as an evidence base for future funding opportunities.

In collaboration with the contractor delivering the works on the weir removal, an application to be nominated for the European Dam Removal Awards was submitted. The project was shortlisted, evidencing the positive impact of the completed works.

Ackers Weir - Before Removal

Ackers Weir - After Removal

Social impact is difficult to measure for an ecological programme due to the lack of direct beneficiaries. The programme did have the aim of creating a greater connection between the local community and the natural habitats and in discussion with the PMB and with TAWS, it was evident that community engagement was a key focus of the project.

Whilst the impact upon the community cannot be directly measured, it can be argued that the project provided high value to local residents. A benefit of partnering with TAWS was that they had a presence within the local area and an understanding of the challenges faced by the residents, having completed greenspace projects in the area for 3 years prior to this one.

As a result, they had tried and tested methods of engagement which focused on consistent, face-to-face communication with residents. By providing a continuous physical presence, relationships and trust were built. As noted in case study in Chapter 6, there were many positive examples of residents engaging where they had previously shown disbelief or interest in the planned works and key to this was core belief of TAWS that the resident's thoughts and ideas should be utilised for the proposed improvements.

In terms of actual engagement undertaken by TAWS, **1059 people** were recorded attending **64 activities** since the project's inception. This includes activities in the project area itself, neighbouring streets and at schools or community venues. This includes attendance at larger community events (such as those in Kingfisher Park & Starbank Schools), as well as smaller activities such as door knocking, litter picks and consultation activities.

965 households & businesses had leaflets delivered to them to raise awareness of the activities and improvements that were being undertaken within the community.

122 unique individuals have been recorded attending multiple activities over a period of time with more intense engagement with the project. This includes those who have been supported to join/create a local Friends group, regular activity group (such as gardening or walking groups) or workshop. These are the individuals TAWS would anticipate being the source of future stewards beyond the end of the currently funded project.

By working with the residents directly and gaining their contribution to the improvements, a sense of pride and ownership was developed within the community. In turn, it is believed this will encourage the ongoing maintenance of the area by the local community.

In addition to promoting the current works, the project has also considered the legacy of the project once works have been completed. The framework for a River Cole Community Commons Stewardship is being developed in order to continue the promotion and the maintenance of the works that have been undertaken. In conversation with TAWS, it was noted that residents having a sense of ownership and pride in their local area is key to this. It is evident that serious consideration is being undertaken to ensure this project is not completed as a 'one-hit' service to the community, leaving them without the motivation or support to continue the positive work.

TAWS Community Engagement Event - 6th May 2023

TAWS Community Engagement Event - 20th May 2023

5. Project Value for Money

Evaluation was undertaken as part of the VFM Guide created by People in Need. The VFM Systems Matrix can be used at any project stage, however is particularly insightful at project assessment. It requires the review of the project documents, internal procedures as well as discussions with program and support staff.

This qualitative tool provides project management teams and evaluators a method for assessing the Value for Money using the "4E" categories: Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Equity. The analysis of each "E" is divided into subcategories of the different stages of a project:

- Identification and Planning
- Implementation and Monitoring
- Evaluation and Learning

Each sub-category includes several standards to be assessed. The standards and their description were adjusted to fit ERDF objectives and the delivery of the project via the organisation.

Each category is scored from 1.00 - 3.00 or N/A if not applicable.

- 1.00 = Not Implemented
- 2.00 = Partly Implemented
- 3.00 = Fully Implemented

Each area is then given a RAG marking to confirm:

- Achieved
- Partially Achieved
- Not Achieved

The table below provides a summary of Value for Money:

Measure	Total Achievable	Total Achieved
Economy	3.00%	**2.80%**
Efficiency	3.00%	**3.00%**
Effectiveness	3.00%	**3.00%**
Equity	3.00%	**3.00%**

Economy

This scored well due the extensively scoped initial project plans and utilising technical expertise to support the budget calculations for the scope of works. Whilst within the initial bid cost mitigation was considered in order to ensure budget would be available for the weir removal, this score could have been improved if the mitigated project budgeting still allowed for the river renaturalisation package of works to also take place. However, evaluators do acknowledge that the increase of costs have been unprecedented in the last two years.

Efficiency

This scored the highest possible rating due to the strong identification and planning of the individual projects and the use of industry accepted standards to verify the requirements and measures for the scope of works. Furthermore, there are effective project management tools in place that support the ongoing monitoring of performance and 100% of outputs, with a proportional project expenditure, will be achieved.

Effectiveness

This scored the highest possible rating due to the clear understanding of what would happen without this intervention and how the benefits of the programme are realised. The objectives were realistic and clear and there is evidence that the programme is achieving what it set out to do. The consideration of the longer-term sustainability and maintenance of the improvements made through the Community Commons Stewardship is an excellent addition to the project.

Equity

This scored the highest possible rating due to the accountability of the programme and the relevant stakeholders being involved in identifying core problems and the project outcome to address them.

Gross Value Added

Due to the ecological nature of the programme, there is no direct economic output that can be measured to contribute towards the calculation of GVA.

However, specific objectives of Investment Priority 6d include investments in green and blue infrastructure and actions that support the provision of ecosystem services on which businesses and communities depend, to increase local natural capital and support sustainable economic growth. As explored in Chapter 1.5 of this report, the benefits of developing the local freshwater ecosystems and enhancing the benefits of their ecosystem services is an aim of this programme.

The Office for National Statistics has developed an experimental measure to estimate the contribution of ecosystem services through natural capital accounting.

Natural capital accounting produces estimates of the economic value of our environment. This is measured in terms of the stocks and flows of goods and services nature provides, also known as ecosystem services. By their definition, these include:

- Provisioning services – these are products from nature such as food, water, energy, and materials
- Regulating services – these include carbon sequestration and air pollution removal, which help to maintain the quality of the natural environment
- Cultural services – these are the non-material benefits we obtain from natural capital, such as tourism, recreation, and aesthetic experience

The table below shows the supply of products from different habitats, or ecosystem assets, to the wider economy, and how these products are consumed through intermediate consumption and final consumption. Determining this relationship can help us to understand the UK economy's reliance on ecosystem services, and the risks borne by climate change and other environmental issues to the flow of ecosystem services to the wider market.[3]

Table 1: Annual value of natural capital, by habitat and type of service, £ million, UK, 2020

Habitat	Provisioning Services (£ million, 2020 prices)	Regulating Services (£ million, 2020 prices)	Cultural Services (£ million, 2020 prices)	All Services (£ million, 2020 prices)
Urban	60.9	-167.0	14,983.6	14,877.5
Marine	8,325.9	0.0	0.0	8,325.9
Woodland	372.7	5,624.3	2,231.0	8,228.0
Freshwater, wetlands and floodplain	6,961.1	-834.4	1,550.2	7,676.8
Enclosed farmland	7,668.9	-3,465.7	2,372.1	6,575.2
Coastal margins	0.0	16.2	2,721.1	2,737.3
Mountain, moorland and heath	878.6	7.7	608.0	1,494.2
Semi-natural grassland	378.9	247.2	749.2	1,375.3
Total	24,647.0	1,428.3	25,215.0	51,290.3

Source: UK natural capital accounts from the Office for National Statistics

[3] Developing supply and use tables for UK natural capital accounts - ONS

This table provides estimates of the ecosystem services that we are currently able to value and it is evident that freshwater habitat ecosystem services make a significant contribution.

6. Conclusion and Lessons Learnt

6.1. Appropriateness of Initial Design

The project was led by UoB but comprised of a consortium of guiding and delivery partners of all key stakeholder organisations with statutory responsibility for, and experience in, green and blue infrastructure delivery. The co-design of the project by this group of stakeholders ensured there was no duplication of project activities with activities already being provided in the area. The BCC and EA were involved in the early development of the project proposal led by UoB with Tyseley Energy Park.

The initial bid was well researched, utilising the delivery partner knowledge and experience of the local area to understand the environmental challenges faced and realise the potential for the scope of the works packages.

National and local policy and strategy were also considered to ensure alignment within the proposal: the project was aligned with the vision and aims of the 2016 GBSLEP SUD Strategy. The focus of the funding call was on the eastern corridor of Birmingham and North Solihull, including the route for HS2 and the natural environment proposals in the HS2 Environmental and Landscape Programme (ELP) on the protection and restoration of biodiversity, ecosystems and innovative technologies and improving hectares of land.

Cole Valley Catchment Landscape Vision: The Environment Agency and Tame Valley Wetlands Landscape Partnership produced a landscape vision and masterplan for the River Cole Catchment in the West Midlands in 2019. It clearly stated the need and potential for concerted action and projects to enhance the connective corridor for wildlife and for key and threatened species that require particular action e.g. water voles, kingfisher, waders, otters, willow and marsh tit and invertebrates.

As explored in Chapters 1.1 and 1.6, the project was funded under PA6, the priorities of which are preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency, with a focus on protecting and restoring biodiversity and soil and promoting ecosystems, including through Natura 2000 and green infrastructure.

Specific objectives of IP6d include investments in green and blue infrastructure and actions that support the provision of ecosystem services on which businesses and communities depend, to increase local natural capital and support sustainable economic growth.

The proposed project and the green and blue infrastructure improvement/remediation activities undertaken align with both the national priorities and the call focus. The activity of the weir removal allowed the watercourse channel to re-naturalise and improve habitat connectivity for aquatic wildlife.

For the human population, the benefits identified included better amenity space, quality of environment and connectivity to wildlife, leading to better understanding and appreciation of the environment. The health and mental wellbeing of the local population aimed to be improved which is an important outcome given that in 2019, Birmingham as a whole had high levels of deprivation, with 40% of the population living in the 10% most deprived areas of England.[4]

These statistics highlighted a need from a local level to invest in Green infrastructure and to support the development of sustainable and healthy communities.

Research by Birmingham City University and UoB, with Haymills Foundation Trust conducted community and business engagement in the area prior to the submission of the initial application. This included two open community engagement events in February 2019 and October 2019, with local enterprises and community groups to identify business, environmental and economic opportunities for investment to regenerate the area.

They identified demand for projects that enhanced local identity through linking to cultural, heritage and natural assets, energy, waste and green transport capabilities. The work built on the UKRI-funded research Urban Living Birmingham project. Specific projects identified were improving green spaces along the Grand Union Canal and River Cole and their interface with the local community.

The wider project management group, and in particular TAWS were responsible for ensuring that community members and residents were aware of, and engaged with the project from the start and with capital works delivery, to ensure that the expected community demand for the project and longer term benefit is realised.

Additionally, natural capital assessment at Tyseley Energy Park by Natural Capital Solutions with the EA and other partners, estimated the level of biodiversity net gain on the area initially named the Lost World, established the baseline level and value of ecosystem services provided by the area, including the level of biodiversity, and connectivity to other local green spaces, residential areas and schools. The economic impact of three scenarios was considered: optimising the site for biodiversity, maximising recreation and managing the site for regulating services. All three scenarios showed an increase in ecosystem service value and biodiversity from the baseline condition, and economic benefits to the local community of regenerating the area.

The habitat enhancement techniques included in the project are accepted practices for strategic partners BCC, the EA and WT-BBC to deliver improvements in species and habitat diversity. The habitat improvements for local residents and community benefits are approved by delivery partners The Active Wellbeing Society. Project partners experience of delivering similar interventions has informed the design of activities and rationale for identifying appropriate sites with the project area for project deliverables.

[4] Birmingham health profile 2019 | Birmingham City Council

The initial design of the programme was detailed, well scoped and substantial evidence quantifying the need for the programme was provided.

6.2. What would have happened without the support and is it still relevant?

At the point of developing the initial bid, it was established that the project would provide funding for activities that had been identified by the strategic partners as important, but for which there hasn't been the necessary funding to carry out without ESIF investment. This project provided the framework to deliver works packages at an increased rate over a shortened period of time, that otherwise may never be delivered. Specifically, the EA were very keen for the removal of the weir due its related benefits and had been lobbying for this work to be undertaken, however the funding through other avenues was not available. Due there being no flood risk, it was less of a priority for the BCC to fund compared to other works. This project directly impacted this and the funding available meant that the works were able to go ahead.

Blue green infrastructure projects such as those delivered under this programme do not in themselves deliver direct economic outputs for local companies. Therefore, there is no commercial rationale for the private sector to deliver such activities in the locality of the corridors, essentially deeming it the responsibility of the public sector to provide this type of infrastructure support. Without the scope and scale of the funding offered under PA6, the impact of individual, smaller scale projects such as the monthly litter picking scheme, would not have benefitted the wide ranging river corridors in the same way.

In conversation with the UoB Project Delivery Team, it was noted that a trusted pool of suppliers has essentially been developed throughout the contracting of this project with appetite to undertake more work should additional funding become available.

Additionally, throughout the programme lifetime the PCRs required focused on the reprofiling of expenditure and the prioritisation of the weir removal works package. There were no changes to the delivery or the intended outputs and impacts, evidencing the relevancy of the support being delivered.

6.3. Making the Most of Opportunities Post EU-Exit

As a member state of the EU, the UK was eligible for financial support from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), jointly referred to by the UK government as EU Structural Funds.

The EU also ran separate funds that support rural development (the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development, EAFRD) and fishing communities (the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, EMFF). The EU categorises these along with the ERDF, ESF and CF as part of a suite of European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. However, within the UK the EAFRD and EMFF are not typically included in the government's use of the term 'structural funds'

The November 2020 spending review described the overall purpose of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) which replaces a trial UK Community Renewal Fund (UKCRF) ‘to level up and create opportunity across the UK for people and places'. The spending review also said that UKSPF spending will ramp up to around £1.5bn a year and “at least match current receipts from EU structural funds.” It will also ‘operate over multiple years' to provide certainty and enable long-term planning. Investments should be aligned with the government’s clean growth and net-zero objectives.

Three UKSPF investment priorities have been determined, each with a broad set of interventions that have been designed to support the overall objectives of each investment priority and relevant Levelling Up missions. They provide significant flexibility for places to focus on what best meets their local needs.

1. **Communities and Place**
   Objectives:

   - Strengthening our social fabric and fostering a sense of local pride and belonging, through investment in activities that enhance physical, cultural and social ties and amenities, such as community infrastructure and local green space, and community-led projects.
   - Building resilient, safe and healthy neighbourhoods, through investment in quality places that people want to live, work, play and learn in, through targeted improvements to the built environment and innovative approaches to crime prevention.

Interventions relevant to WSBGC that could build on the existing foundation of improvements already achieved:

- **E2:** Funding for new, or improvements to existing, community and neighbourhood infrastructure projects including those that increase communities’ resilience to natural hazards, such as flooding. This could cover capital spend and running costs.
- **E3:** Creation of and improvements to local green spaces, community gardens, watercourses and embankments, along with incorporating natural features into wider public spaces.

2. **Supporting Local Business**
   Objectives:

   - Creating jobs and boosting community cohesion, through investments that build on existing industries and institutions, and range from support for starting businesses to visible improvements to local retail, hospitality and leisure sector facilities.

- Promoting networking and collaboration, through interventions that bring together businesses and partners within and across sectors to share knowledge, expertise and resources, and stimulate innovation and growth.
- Increasing private sector investment in growth-enhancing activities, through targeted support for small and medium-sized businesses to undertake new-to-firm innovation, adopt productivity-enhancing, energy efficient and low carbon technologies and techniques, and start or grow their exports.

Interventions relevant to WSBGC that could build on the existing foundation of improvements already achieved:

- **E32:** Investment in resilience infrastructure and nature based solutions that protect local businesses and community areas from natural hazards including flooding and coastal erosion.

3. **People and Skills**

Lead local authorities and partners must note that the Fund will focus on communities and place and local business interventions in 2022-23 and 2023-24, alongside support for people through the Multiply adult numeracy programme. This complements residual employment and skills funding from the European Social Fund. UKSPF investment to support people and skills will follow from 2024-25, when the funding pot reaches its full extent.

However the opportunities available throughout UKSPF are not specific to habitat improvement and wider funding opportunities should be explored.

The Environment Agency administers the natural environment investment readiness fund (NEIRF) on behalf of the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).The scheme supports the government's goals in the 25 year environment plan, green finance strategy and 10 point plan for a green industrial revolution. It aims to stimulate private investment and market based mechanisms that improve and safeguard our domestic natural environment by helping projects get ready for investment.

The NEIRF is a competitive grants scheme providing grants of between £10,000 and £100,000 to support the development of environmental projects in England that:

- Help achieve one or more natural environmental outcomes from the 25 year environment plan
- Have the ability to produce revenue from ecosystem services to attract and repay investment
- Produce an investment model that can be scaled up and reproduced

The programme is in its second phase of funding and whilst additional calls are not currently open, any underspend and subsequent opportunities for funding reallocation calls should be monitored.

6.4. Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

The project will successfully deliver it's outputs and achieve the intended activity and impact as outlined in the logic model.

It must be noted that it is unusual for a University to be delivering a large scope of capital works on predominantly Council-owned land. The success of this project evidences the benefits of working with non-traditional delivery partners and should be a consideration for other managing authorities looking to contract future works.

However, in conversation with the UoB Project Delivery Team, it was noted that the final approval of the project was delayed as certain parts of Council land were not registered. Given the immense budget and resource pressures faced by Local Authorities, where delivering a project such as this where land permissions are key, it is recommended that this is prioritised earlier in the process.

Due to the excellent initial scoping and scheduling of the programme, the evaluators have few recommendations in way of programme development.

However in discussion with the community delivery partner, it was evident that the ability to develop meaningful relationships with the local residents was key to gaining their trust and input into improving and maintaining their area. In order to maximise the opportunity for this, it is their experience that short interventions are not conducive and should therefore be a minimum of a year.

As the impact of a habitat improvement programme can be hard to quantify and the benefits realised beyond the lifetime of the programme, the legacy of the works completed is extremely important. The evaluators recognise steps to promote this have been taken with the programme's work within the community through the Community Commons Stewardship, but further ecological analysis would be recommended beyond the end of the programme, if funding allows. This will allow for the assessment of longer-term improvements and provide an evidence base for future funding.

The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS)
is a community benefit society and cooperative working to develop healthy, happy communities living active and connected lives.
They were chosen to deliver the community engagement element of the River Cole project having been delivering long-term interventions within the Birmingham area over the last 20 years, providing them with a wealth of local knowledge and an understanding of the challenges residents faced. These interventions included rewilding projects funded by Sport England, another partner of the River Cole project, to revive greenspaces and create new habitats to improve biodiversity.

Specific to the River Cole Project, the TAWS team facilitated a wide range of engagement activities to understand the issues faced by the residents in terms of accessing and enjoying the river corridor, to encourage participation with the improvements being made, to raise awareness of the work being undertaken and develop a sense of pride and community ownership within the local area.

When engaging with residents, TAWS followed the following three key principles:

- Co-creation - understand individual needs and identify how they can best contribute
- Distribution of decisions - ensure decisions are shared and promote leadership from within the community
- Unusual suspects - identify and engage the harder to reach audience

Long-term residents felt disillusioned as their local greenspaces were neglected and despite previous promises of change, no significant action had been taken to improve the areas. It was evident to TAWS that continued, consistent face-to-face interactions were key to building trust with the local residents. Door-knocking was the main route to audience, where litter and safety concerns were identified as the main barriers to enjoying the environment.

TAWS also facilitated a wide range of community events in order to encourage interaction between residents and their environment. This was done through on-street drop-in sessions, litter picking , a community sports day and a wildflower meadow seed-sowing day, amongst many others. They sub-contracted Arts in the Yard to host a tile-painting activity whereby residents could paint a tile that would then be installed within the community, visible to family and friends.

Additionally, a focus was placed on education and highlighting the importance and benefits of the natural environment to the younger generation. TAWS engaged with the three largest schools in the area, forming strong relationships that will continue developing beyond the lifetime of the River Cole project. Activities such as bike rides in green spaces, game days and arts activities were facilitated. At the end of the project, a final showcase event will be held and TAWS will deliver sessions designed to make environmental science more accessible for the younger generation.

Key to the success of the work undertaken by TAWS was ensuring that genuine relationships were built within the local community. By developing a sense of pride and ownership amongst the residents, the impact of the project is far more likely to be long-lasting and the greenspaces less likely to revert to their previous state. A community action group and a 'Friends Of' group were created, which is to be led by the residents. A success noted by the TAWS Project Managers was that a number of previously disengaged residents were now contributing within these. Additionally, towards the end of the project TAWS facilitated a Corporate Social Responsibility litter-picking day and it was noted by volunteers that there wasn't enough litter to pick, demonstrating the ripple of effect of activities previously undertaken.

In conversation with the TAWS Project Managers it was evident how passionate they are about the improvements they are making, not only to the local environment but to the residents' lives. By being community-led, they were able to use specific feedback and complaints to shape the improvements being made, ensuring that they truly benefitted the residents.

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