

Active Design



Case Study

RIVER COLE COMMUNITY COMMONS PROJECT, BIRMINGHAM

Using enjoyable methods of consultation to activate underused local spaces and networks in a sustainable way.

River Cole Community Commons Project

Name:

River Cole Community Commons

Location:

Tyseley, Birmingham, West Midlands

[Project video](#)

[Project evaluation](#)

Key Words:

Community Engagement, Biodiversity, Wayfinding, Stewardship, Active Travel

All photographs in this case study are credited to Sport England, unless specified otherwise.



The River Cole Community Commons is a great example of using a programme of community-led wayfinding to create a network of local green spaces to encourage physical activity. It was a partnership project to rehabilitate Tyseley and Hay Mills' urban green space into an accessible and connected green corridor, increasing physical activity and active travel throughout the community, whilst improving habitats and biodiversity, and community activity. The project was funded by European Regional Development Fund, Birmingham City Council, Environment Agency, The Active Wellbeing Society, Sport England and University of Birmingham.

KEY ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Activity for All

A variety of interventions throughout the area supports physical activity equitably across all ages, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, enabling everyone to be active.



Providing connected active travel routes

A network of routes across the River Cole were developed and supported by wayfinding, signage, lighting and landmarks to help people find their way.



High-quality streets and spaces

The creation of informal spaces, children's play, resting places and meeting spots allowed the area to prioritise people and create a high quality 'street' scene.



Activating Spaces

Consultation and engagement events enabled the community to design their local spaces for their needs and a continued programme of activities supports the project's sustainability.

How it happened

The Tyseley and Hay Mills area is located within east Birmingham and has areas of deprivation; it was historically known for its industrial heritage, particularly in relation to railway engineering, and is home to the River Cole. The community in Tyseley and Hay Mills, had been facing challenges in using their blue and green space for physical activity and the natural environment itself needed enhancement. So, in 2023, the River Cole Community Commons project led by the University of Birmingham was launched.

Through consultation with the community, University of Birmingham identified that the River Cole corridor provided a greenspace for residents with several parks and nature reserves, offering key active travel routes, alongside amenities and spaces for relaxation and outdoor pursuits. However, physical activity along the river was low, walking and cycling opportunities were not utilised, and maintaining and preserving blue and green infrastructure had proven difficult.

The project used innovative design solutions to create a programme of blue and green infrastructure improvements to activate the area and address these challenges. The blended approach saw habitat enhancements across the project area connected by a programme of community-led wayfinding, activity areas, planting and arts interventions. The facilitation of an integrated volunteer and resident engagement programme ensured all interventions were co-designed and informed by the local community, maximising physical activity opportunities and sustainable long-term engagement with the project area.



Delivering against other priority agendas

Active Design is focused on increasing physical activity through design interventions in the built and natural environment. Many of these interventions have cross-over benefits to other objectives, such as climate change resilience, overall environmental sustainability, economic growth and social value.

ENVIRONMENTAL

Biodiversity and environmental improvements were high on the agenda throughout design and delivery and the project delivered improvements that were beneficial to the environment and the community. This involved coppicing smaller trees and shrubs to reduce shade, creating more open habitat conditions for different species and allowing the river to become more visible and accessible to users of the path and surrounding green space, creating a safer space. To promote biodiversity along the river, bird boxes were also added along the route and lighting was carefully selected, with solar panels used as a sustainable source of power.

EDUCATION

Local schools were closely involved within consultation and design of the project, providing a foundation for future work. Building on this, the project identified long-term impact, providing education opportunities for local community members and schoolchildren through the development of specific sites for urban farming schemes, meadow creation, forest schools and nature trails.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The University of Birmingham ensured that as part of the procurement process, tenderers' sustainability performance was assessed for social responsibility. The university worked with the local co-operative, Places in Common, who explored models of governance co-ownership, brokering power between the local authority and the community who live in the area.



Active Design principles in practice



A variety of interventions throughout the area supports physical activity equitably across all ages, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, enabling everyone to be active.

1. ACTIVITY FOR ALL

Learning and listening is essential to properly understand the needs you are seeking to address and for the delivery of all the principles of Active Design. All environments should be designed to support physical activity equitably across all ages, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, enabling everyone to be active and build long-term active habits and behaviours.

A key strength of the project was the extent and variety of consultation that was carried out with the local community, from initial design through to delivery. The University of Birmingham partnered with The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWs) building on the established presence they had in the area, their understanding of challenges faced by residents, and the engagement which had already taken place and where local groups were established. TAWs 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 co-produced activities that met their needs while also introducing them to the local greenspace and assets within the community.

Engagement focused on consistent, face-to-face communication with residents which helped build trust. Creating an offer for all, a variety of consultation and engagement events helped gather the views of a wide variety of people, with over 1000 people attending 64 activities.

These activities took place along the River Cole itself, within local streets, schools and community venues alongside smaller activities such as litter picks and consultation activities. Consultation included understanding the barriers residents faced and improvements they would like to see. Adding fun to the consultation and value to the project, residents were also able to create additional design features for the infrastructure and paths. This gave a sense of pride and ownership within the community which continues to sustain, promote and maintain the project in the long term.



“

**Emily Prestwood, Energy Development Manager,
University of Birmingham**

Getting the residents who live in the area around the River Cole involved and engaged was very important to the project. The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWs) engaged with the community to ask people about their perceptions of the River Cole area, whether they use it at all and, if not, what the barriers are. They also asked people what they would like to see in these spaces. Their ethos is to engagement with the community in a way that includes absolutely everyone from all cultures and age groups. With the support of community partnerships, local organisations and residents they sought to proactively and collaboratively remove barriers and rebuild people's confidence to access and use this area again. The hope is to activate the commons and see the community to continue to cherish and use the River Cole as their space.

”





A network of routes across the River Cole were developed and supported by wayfinding, signage, lighting and landmarks to help people find their way.

2. PROVIDING CONNECTED ACTIVE TRAVEL ROUTES

Creating easy-to-use networks supported by signage and landmarks helps people to find their way. Designing these routes connects places safely and directly, encouraging active travel for all ages and abilities.

Research and engagement with the local community had identified that the area was under-utilised as a route for commuting and travel and as a green space for leisure and physical activity. The project improved the environment of the River Cole for local people, by creating a new area of public green space on the adjacent path, to connect the path and river to the local community and improving existing routes.

Engagement, particularly amongst women and girls, had identified safety as an area of importance to the community and consultation was key to striking the right interventions along the active travel routes and the project introduced security by design measure to address these challenges. Solar-powered lighting solutions were embedded into the wayfinding infrastructure, with lighting providing at key focal points along the river. A community-led programme of wayfinding interventions across the whole project was used to enable active travel across the improved green and blue infrastructure, and to nearby parks, community assets and active travel infrastructure. The community also felt a sense of pride over the history of their local area, so this was built into the wayfinding infrastructure, giving a background to the area's heritage on key pieces of signage.



The creation of informal spaces, children's play, resting places and meeting spots allowed the area to prioritise people and create a high quality 'street' scene.

3. HIGH-QUALITY STREETS AND SPACES

Streets and outdoor public spaces should be active environments in their own right. High-quality streets and spaces encourage activity; streets and outdoor public spaces should be safe, attractive and functional with high-quality materials.

Within public spaces, subdividing the space into a variety of different environments can allow opportunity for people to meet, talk, exercise, move through and take part in activities. The River Cole Project enabled this through creating a network of informal spaces located off the main path along the river. To enable activity for all, children's play, informal spaces, meetings spots and resting spots within nature were all provided along the route. These spaces were designed

by the community through consultation, with additional design features such as colourful tiles installed on the wayfinding infrastructure to create a sense of ownership.

Continuing along the adjacent canal network and into local residential areas, looking beyond the site's red line boundary, the project connected local residents to the River Cole, using wayfinding infrastructure and vibrant designs to activate unwelcoming paths and spaces. These features were designed by local schoolchildren and a local graffiti artist to help connect people to the River Cole and create a more positive environment. A collection of high-quality spaces shown below really improved the quality of the public realm and amenity value through innovative design and affordable solutions.





Consultation and engagement events enabled the community to design their local spaces for their needs and a continued programme of activities supports the project's sustainability.

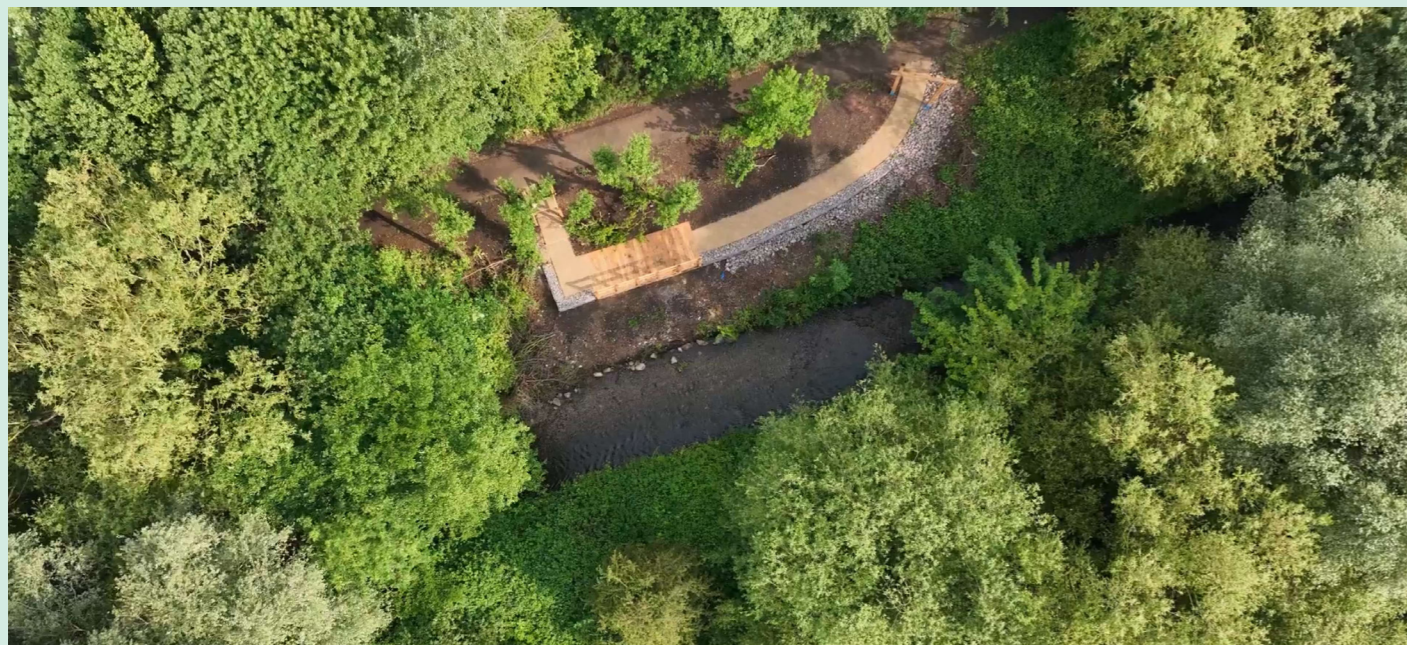
4. ACTIVATING SPACES

The provision of spaces and facilities that can help to improve physical activity is great but should be supported by a commitment to activate them. Often local people can be the most effective in communicating to their communities the opportunities for sport and physical activity, so volunteers and local champions within a community should be supported and encouraged where possible.

It is important to think about activation and long-term impact at the start of any project, which the University of Birmingham did to develop ownership and stewardship of the area by the residents. A co-ordinated programme of co-designed activities with the local community delivered wayfinding and small-scale affordable improvements in the main project areas, including planting, urban farming, creation of nature walks and creation of biodiversity activity areas. These

activities formed part of the process of making the space available for community, biodiversity and economic activity. Involving residents in the design and delivery of these interventions alongside strategic partners was 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.

Continuing to look long-term, building on the extensive consultation and engagement with local people, a framework for a River Cole Community Commons Stewardship was developed in order to continue the promotion and the maintenance of the works that were undertaken. In conversation with the local community benefit society TAWS, it was noted that residents having a sense of ownership and pride in their local area was key to this.



Key learnings from University of Birmingham

- **Engagement** - The ability to develop meaningful relationships with 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, where possible, should be longer.
- **Consider alignment** - National and local policy and strategy were also considered to ensure alignment within the proposal.
- **Local importance** - The community felt a sense of pride in their local area and it's history and building this into the project helped with creating a sense of ownership and uniqueness.
- **Consortia approach** - The project was led by the University of Birmingham 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.

Conclusion

Designed with both the environment and communities in mind, the River Cole Community Commons project has shown how the local environment can be adapted to create a network of walking and cycling routes throughout the local community to connect them to their green space through physical activity.

Whether you want to cycle to work, walk home, spend some time within nature, take your child to the play area or find a meeting spot with your friends, the River Cole provides a space for this.

Consultation can be fun! The project has shown that while consultation is key to understanding community needs, it can be fun for them too. Having sessions outside on site and hosting arts and crafts activities for children helped deliver consultation in an enjoyable way. It was great for the community to then see

their designs and artwork out in their local area. This community engagement was critical to the project's success and sustainability and with community events along the river continuing now, stewardship is strong, enabling a sustainable method of long-term maintenance among the community and a place for their physical activity.



Active Design



Acknowledgements:

Sport England wishes to thank University of Birmingham and The Active Wellbeing Society for their contributions to this document.

Prepared by: Sport England

All photographs in this case study are credited to Sport England, except for the images on pages 6 and 7 which are owned by The Active Wellbeing Society and the image on page 10 which is owned by University of Birmingham.

Sport England
SportPark
Oakwood Drive
Loughborough
LE11 3QF

sportengland.org

August 2024

