

Active Design



Case Study

SOWERBY SPORTS VILLAGE, NORTH YORKSHIRE

**The value of community
engagement and enhancing
biodiversity to create a space
for everyone to enjoy.**

Sowerby Sports Village, North Yorkshire

Name:

Sowerby Sports Village

Location:

Thirsk, North Yorkshire

[Project video](#)

Key words:

Community Engagement,
Biodiversity, Informal Sport,
ActiveTrack

The creation of the Sowerby Sports Village is an excellent example of how effective consultation can result in a community asset that supports and encourages physical activity and social connection in a local area.

KEY ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES



Activity for all

Comprehensive engagement identified key additions to the site, opening up opportunities for all community members to participate in physical activity.



Mixing uses and co-locating facilities

The site offers a wide range of services in one space creating a community hub with physical activity opportunities at the heart of the project.



Providing activity infrastructure

Considering elements that would encourage physical activity for all ages and abilities were incorporated into the designs including benches and lighting.



Maintaining high quality flexible spaces

Instilling ownership in a space is critical for its ongoing use and maintenance of the space.



Activating spaces

Early engagement with local clubs and community organisations has helped with the ongoing use of the sports village and its long-term sustainability.

How it happened

In 2007, Hambleton District Council (now under new unitary authority of North Yorkshire Council) published their Local Development Plan, which allocated the site in Sowerby for 1,000 new homes and designated recreation space. The site was previously agricultural land, so this allocation created a new opportunity for sport and physical activity in the community. As part of the masterplan development, Hambleton District Council undertook significant consultation with the community to create a space which would provide a unique opportunity for a high-quality space, with emphasis on physical activity, exercise and habitat creation.

When the local running club – Thirsk and Sowerby Harriers – were initially approached by the Council, they proposed a traditional 400m athletics track, but there was neither the funding nor space to accommodate this on the site.

However, Hambleton District Council remained interested in providing something for the running club as well as the wider community; and they engaged with a specialist architect and England Athletics - the National Governing Body, to create England's first ActiveTrack.

The resulting 1km long macadam surfaced loop, has created an inspiring facility for local people that meanders around nine sports pitches and a series of community allotment plots, and encourages running, walking, cycling, and wheeling in a safe, open, and green environment – helping to promote physical activity and better health outcomes in the community.



Introducing the Active Track

There are currently 270 traditional 400m running tracks in England and these will always have an important part to play in athletics across the country. Although these are key facilities for athletics, people often view traditional running tracks as a domain of the serious and elite runners. While this is certainly not true, it is a common perception and, for many, the thought of stepping foot on a running track is as nerve-wracking as standing on the start line of an Olympic 100m final.

England Athletics took the view that if they wanted to attract new participants, they needed to throw the rulebook out of the window and come up with a new generation of accessible, inspiring facilities that would remove all perceived barriers to participation and encourage people of all ages and abilities to lace up their shoes and have some fun.

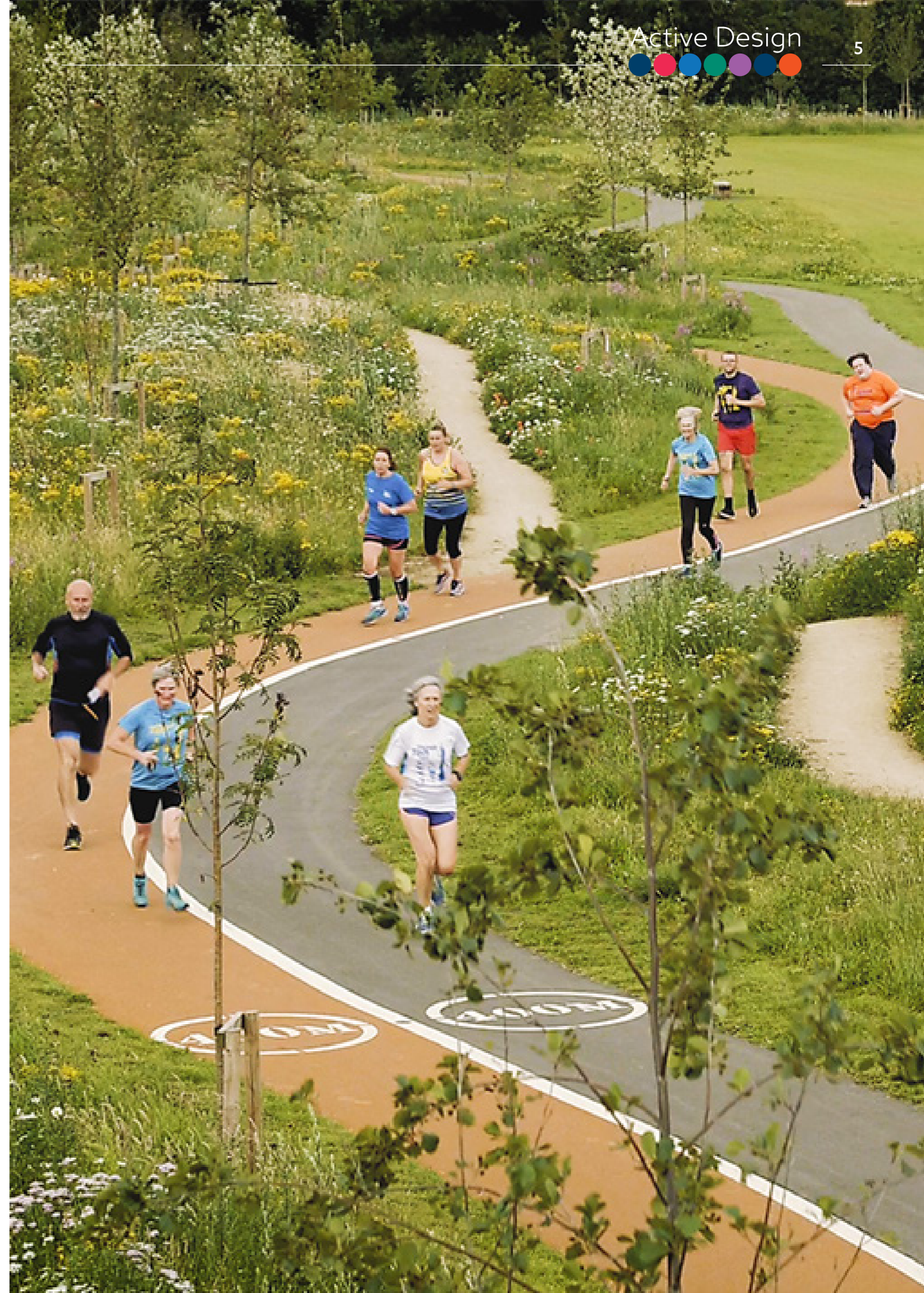
The beauty of Active Tracks is that they remove all barriers, both physical and psychological, and provide accessible, inspiring outdoor places where communities and entire families can enjoy being active together. For some this will be short walks combined with regular rest stops at provided seating. For others this may be walking, pushing, jogging, running, cycling or even roller blading. For Active Tracks, there really is no rulebook: just be active and have fun!

Active Tracks are designed to be more than just a path around some open space. The Sowerby example boasts meandering loops, off road sections, cycle burns, planted trees, meadows, allotments, bench seating and clear ground markings and signage.

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**Robert Burn –
Chair at Thirsk and Sowerby
Harriers Running Club**

Unlike many standard athletic facilities, the track is accessible 24/7 and for those taking their first steps into running they can use the track early in the morning or during the daytime if they are apprehensive about being in a more public arena. This is a track designed for everyone, and everyone in our local community loves it.



Delivering against other priority agendas

One of the key messages of the 2023 Active Design was that by delivering environments that promote health and physical activity, you can also achieve better outcomes towards other key policy priorities, including: increasing biodiversity, reduction in

costs to healthcare, route to net zero, reduction in social inequality and more economically productive communities.

BIODIVERSITY

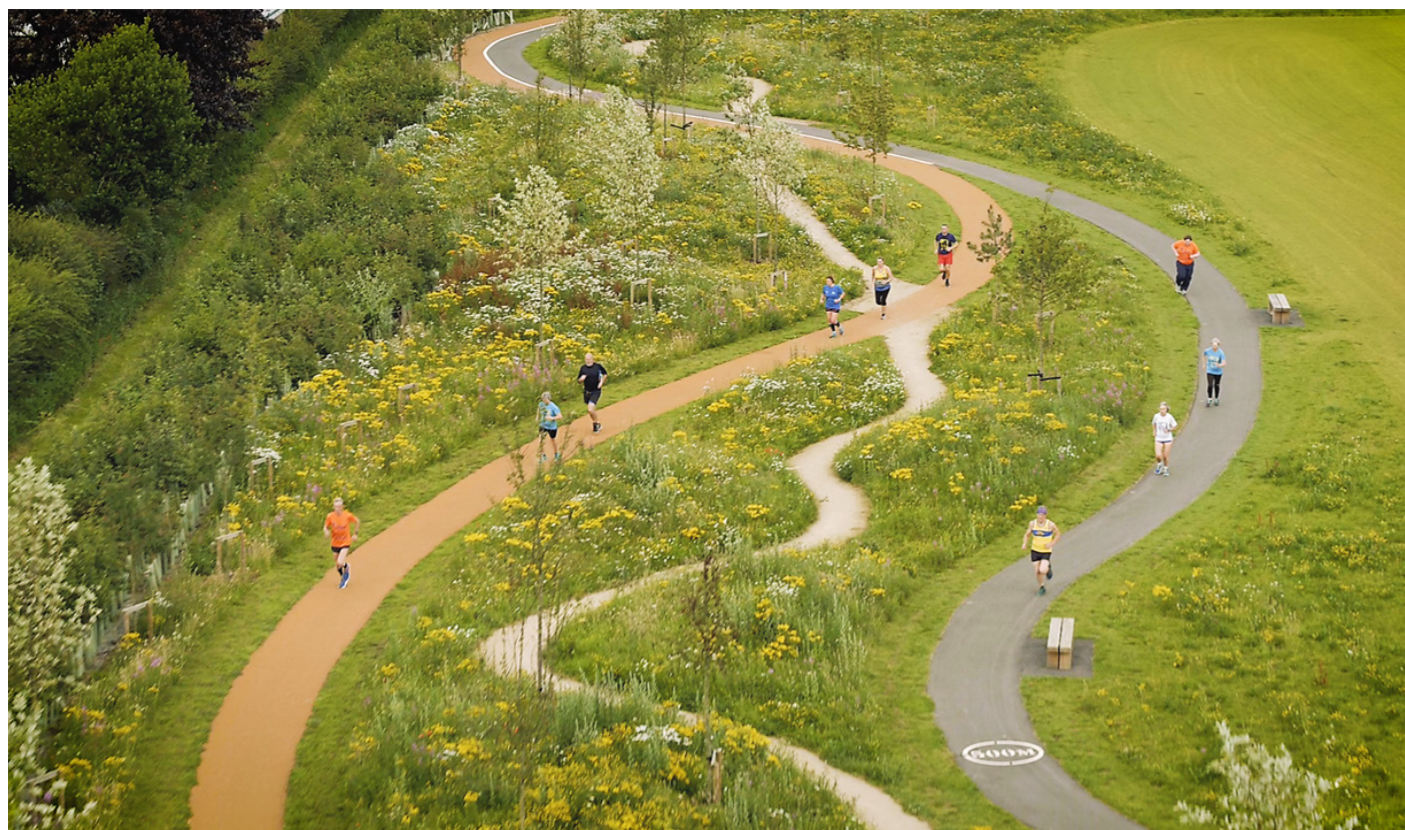
Sowerby Sports Village has become a biodiverse space. re-form followed planning policies outlined in the Hambleton Local Plan to enhance and protect the natural environment. As part of the plan, over 10,000 native trees and hedgerows were planted to reduce the carbon footprint as part of the council's climate change commitment.

Following consultation with the local community, re-form included in the masterplan species-rich meadows, hedgerows, native tree planting, bird boxes, bug hotels and hedgehog tunnels to provide habitats for local wildlife. By focussing on the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in the plan, the site becomes more attractive to users and therefore they are more likely to visit and engage in physical activity to improve both their physical and mental wellbeing.



Active Design principles in practice

When we look at Sowerby Sports Village, we can see how this project has demonstrated how an active environment can be created, illustrating several of the Active Design principles, which have been demonstrated through the successful consultation, creation and protection of local habitat and creating a space for all ages and abilities.



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Local resident

I come here with my son to ride our bikes after school. It's a great thing to do together, and you always end up bumping into people you know.

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Comprehensive engagement identified key additions to the site, opening up opportunities for all community members to participate in physical activity.

1. ACTIVITY FOR ALL

The foundational principle of Active Design, which underpins all other principles throughout the guide is 'Activity for all'. This principle states that all environments should support physical activity equitably across all ages, ethnicities, genders, and abilities, enabling everyone to be active and build long-term active habits and behaviours. One of the key ways to achieve environments that provide opportunities for everyone to be physically active is through an engagement process to properly understand the needs of the community members. By listening and learning, planning and design professionals can understand the issues raised by users and provide a design that best meets the needs of the community.

The approach taken was to develop the site masterplan in collaboration with community members through a series of consultations. The council also developed a stakeholder group that was made up of local clubs, schools, the parish council, voluntary organisations and North Yorkshire Sport. Following the extensive consultation and recommendations from the stakeholder group, the council made 12 significant changes to the masterplan of the sports village.

The delivery of the Active Track was one of the most significant alterations made from the masterplan following community consultations. This shift occurred because community members indicated that as part of the recreation space, they would like to see space for informal sport such as walking, cycling and running. The resulting Active Track has attracted users that would not usually use a more traditional sports

facility and engendered a sense of ownership by the local community.

In addition to engagement, consideration was given to accessible design and safety of all users. These considerations included the widths of the paths and track along with the routes from the car park all the way to the fitness track to ensure these were accessible. Interpretation boards were installed for wayfinding and to provide information about the site, including how to navigate the site safely.

It is important for developers, landscape architects and those in planning to see how a masterplan may be able to deliver on local existing priorities. Andrew Price, director at reform, says that "understanding social dynamics, local people and the local economy allows you to design more valuable places". When these places are created, community members have a greater sense of ownership over the space and look to protect and maintain it for years to come.

Local residents, schools, parish councillors, local activity clubs and the volunteer sector provided information on how they use a space, what their threats are and how they feel in a space. This in-depth consultation revealed some surprising outcomes and led to the creation of a space that people gain a sense of stewardship over, leading to a positive, sustainable site.



The site offers a wide range of services in one space creating a community hub with physical activity opportunities at the heart of the project.

2. MIXING USES AND CO-LOCATING FACILITIES

People are more likely to combine trips and use active forms of transport when spaces offer multiple reasons to visit. Co-locating facilities such as sport and recreation opportunities alongside other commonly visited destinations can raise the awareness around the physical activity opportunities and create easy opportunities for people to incorporate activity into their daily lives.

The sports village is part of a strategic masterplan for this area of Sowerby that includes 1,000 new homes, a new primary school, employment land, a residential home, children's nursery and a supermarket. The co-location of these developments provides the community with convenient access to a good mix of uses and provides the opportunity to use forms of active travel to move about the site. The Active Track provides informal sport activities alongside other

formal sport opportunities on the site, therefore creating opportunities for all users. Since the opening of the site, it has been used at all times of the day, each day of the week.

It is important when producing a masterplan, or any development, that movement of users to and from the site has been considered. Currently, Sowerby Sports Village is more of a destination rather than a route that links people to other services; however how people access the site has been taken into consideration through ensuring that there are multiple access points in locations that best serve where people travel to and from the site. When creating a site masterplan, it is key to think beyond the site boundaries, how it fits with the surrounding areas and how all users will access the site.





Considering elements that would encourage physical activity for all ages and abilities were incorporated into the designs including benches and lighting.

3. PROVIDING ACTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Considering the implementation of infrastructure that supports and enables physical activity is important when designing a space. This infrastructure can be in the form of lighting, public toilets, clear wayfinding networks, bike maintenance tools and other opportunities that can encourage wider activity for all ages and abilities.

One of the lessons learned from the Sowerby Sports Village was the lack of lighting implemented, which would have allowed more users to use the space in the evening. The challenge when implementing lighting in a space

is the consideration of species such as foraging bats and respecting neighbouring properties. As lighting was not an option along the Active Track, the designers opted to implement waymarking lights that are useful but don't increase safety levels at night.

Comfortable benches are located along the track, so users have frequent opportunities to stop and rest. The benches also allow people to occupy the space more passively while watching their family members. One key design element is that parents can sit and see their children around the whole lap of the track, allowing a greater sense of exploration for the child in a safe environment.



Local retired couple:
We often go for a stroll before tea. We sometimes go on the footpaths around the village but we like coming here in the Autumn and Winter as the paths are better.



Instilling ownership in a space is critical for its ongoing use and maintenance of the space.

4. MAINTAINING HIGH QUALITY FLEXIBLE SPACES

When designing a space and engaging with community members, the long-term maintenance and viability of the facilities and spaces should be considered. A site such

as Sowerby Sports Village was developed to encourage physical activity opportunities and therefore the site should be effectively maintained and managed to support this purpose.

When people have a sense of ownership they are more likely to instigate positive change. This loops back into getting the community involved at the early stages of a project: when the local community has inputted and shaped the way the project is developed, they have greater sense of ownership over the space.

Creating flexible spaces that can evolve over time is also important for the long-term use of a space. The more ways there are to use a space, the greater variety of people will use it, creating a safer, more valuable space for the community. The Sowerby site can be used from a range of people including elite runners to our ageing population to have an afternoon walk.

Andrew Price
 Director at re-form
 Landscape Architecture

Instilling ownership in a space is critical for its ongoing use and maintenance of the space. Places don't stop when a project is finished. It's important that they continue to evolve, to meet the needs of local people.





Early engagement with local clubs and community organisations has helped with the ongoing use of the sports village and its long-term sustainability.

5. ACTIVATING SPACES

A space can be delivered but activating it is key to the sustainability and success of the site. Phase one of the Sowerby Sports Village not only created a new space for the Thirsk and Sowerby Harriers running club to train on Mondays and Wednesdays, but the space also organically generated a new Facebook group called the Sowerby Environmental Space Project. This group was developed to record wildlife sightings within the Sowerby Sports Village and generate chat about the project and the local environment.



This use of social media has maximised the participation within the site and realised the potential of delivering biodiversity as part of the site's development in order to attract users and support physical activity opportunities. Activating spaces can have a knock-on benefit to the economy by increasing footfall in spaces and facilities, which can be vital for their long-term viability. Thirsk Falcons football team use it as a base since the delivery of the Football Foundation funded 4g pitch. They train most days of the week, bringing an increased sense of vibrancy and meaning there are constantly eyes on the space to make it feel safer for other users.



Key learnings from North Yorkshire Council

- **Engagement** - Engage with people from the outset to allow changes to be made during the master planning process as this builds relationships and lets people know that they are being listened to.
- **Collaboration** - Early conversations with community members can alleviate fears about change and creates a sense of ownership that makes people care about the facility and look after it. A project of this nature does not happen overnight - there will be bumps and delays along the way. It is therefore important to keep lines of communication open with partners and the community to manage their expectations.
- **Take risks** - The original aspiration for the Sowerby running community was for a traditional 400m running track. As this was not feasible in terms of the space available, the Active Track was created. Feedback from the runners is that they actually prefer what has been created as it is a more inclusive facility.
- **Maintain** - The landscaping plan for this site was extensive, looks great and is a haven for local wildlife, but it needs to be maintained; therefore, programmes of maintenance need to be factored into planning and ongoing budgets.



Robert Burn
Chair at Thirsk and Sowerby
Harriers Running Club

Since it was installed, we have increased our club membership by around 40% and outside of club activity it is really well used by the community.

Conclusion

Sowerby Sports Village has been designed by the people, for the people and that is shown in its use throughout the year. When re-form designed the project, considerations were taken to deliver for a wide range of activities for both informal and

formal sport. These days you can see everyone from a child learning to ride a bike, to dog walkers, bird spotters, football teams, running clubs and kite flyers. The size of the site allows all these things to happen together. It also allows people to discover

something new that they haven't tried before.

Since the initial consultation, the council has undertaken a series of further consultations with local providers of sport and physical activity, which enabled three key

strategies to be developed. This process confirmed the Sowerby Sports Village masterplan will play a key role in meeting the needs identified within the Thirsk and Sowerby area, to increase and enhance opportunities for local people to take part in sport and physical activity.



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All photographs in this case study are credited to re-form landscape architecture, except for the aerial images on pages 3, 5 and 8 which are owned by North Yorkshire Council.

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