

ADEPT PRESIDENT'S AWARDS 2019 CATEGORY 3 IMPROVING THE ENVIRONMENT, PROMOTING HEALTH

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Luton Borough Council: River Lea Restoration

Summary:

A successful project for chalk river restoration which has delivered multiple benefits in biodiversity and flood risk, public health and accessibility for the local community.

Outline:

Two years ago the River Lea flowed along a deep, restricted channel made of concrete which meant that silt covered the natural gravels, making it harder for fish and other creatures to thrive, reproduce or even survive. In addition, high walls separated the river from the floodplain increasing fluvial flood risk to residents.

The river was also noticeably unwelcoming and sadly hidden from local communities in an area with a high number of families who could have been enjoying a rich natural environment close to our town centre. In truth, the whole area was an eyesore.

Luton's "can do" attitude took control so we did what we do best – we rolled our sleeves up, rallied around each other and got to work with our fantastic local people, all of us committed to making a real difference. In this case improving biodiversity, reducing flood risk and creating health benefits through a fantastic local space our community deserve, can enjoy and be proud of!

Representatives from the council's parks, highways, property and construction, ecology and flood risk teams all got together back in 2016, alongside Affinity Water, local community groups, businesses and other stakeholders under the umbrella of "Luton Lea Catchment Partnership". The core team met up regularly and we called on specialists when needed.

It was very much a 'collaboration' so extensive public consultation was carried out from the beginning to ensure the local community not only felt part of the project, but could shape and influence its design.

We started by re-meandering the river along the park's edge and connecting it to the surrounding environment by removing the concrete steps, walls and iron railings that had enclosed it. Excess soil was then removed creating gentle slopes towards the river, thus providing flood storage capacity on peripheral land, protecting local properties downstream and improving safe access to the watercourse.

Riffles and pools were then incorporated in designing the new river channel. The riffles created critical habitat for fish to spawn as these areas are faster flowing, contain cleaner gravel and are highly oxygenated. Meanwhile Pools provided deep, slower flowing areas which allow fish to rest. Chalk stream vegetation was planted along the banks to provide riparian habitat for invertebrates. In addition these river corridor features have helped re-establish the natural flow of the river.

To make space for the new landscape, the nearby children's play area was moved a short distance into the park, which created an opportunity to replace and refurbish older equipment and provide new safety surfaces. New inclusive equipment was installed, providing access to the play area for disabled children. This has been well-received by the community and has encouraged use of the area by all local children.

Improving accessibility to the play area, coupled with river habitat restoration, has made the watercourse an attractive place for children and adults to enjoy which of course delivers additional positive health outcomes for physical and mental health.

In addition to the significant visual improvement and creation of habitats for fish, plants and invertebrates, the project brought enhanced opportunities for the council and other stakeholders to engage with the local community through a natural feature. School children and local scouts group had been to visit and learn about the river and the site is used by Young River Wardens.

The scheme keeps receiving positive comments from local community and visitors and should be regarded as an example of best practice in achieving multiple benefits, linking increased flood water capacity with educational and recreational opportunities, improved visual amenity and access, creating micro-habitats and improving globally rare ecosystems.

The scheme had been highly commended at a recent River Restoration Conference in Liverpool and a Masters student is starting a thesis research on the scheme.

Our Corporate Director Laura Church summed it up perfectly: "The change is remarkable and reflects hard work, great collaboration, connection with the community and a huge commitment to making a positive difference across so many levels. I couldn't be any more proud"

Please see a video about the project: <https://stakeholder.affinitywater.co.uk/manor-park-improvements.aspx>



Before



During construction



After



Stakeholder and community engagement