

Case Study: Connswater Community Greenway (Northern Ireland)



Community members using the Connswater Community Greenway

The Connswater Community Greenway was delivered through a complex consortium led by EastSide Partnership, with the needs of a neglected local community at its heart. Read on to find out how the initiative developed, and why this story of empowerment and evolution has lessons for communities across the UK and Ireland.

Background

Connswater Community Greenway (CCG) is an urban greenspace regeneration project in East Belfast transforming underused and inaccessible spaces into a community asset. The Greenway was completed in 2017, and passes through 29 electoral wards, seven of which are within the top 25% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland. The project consisted of the creation of a 9 km linear park connecting open spaces along the Connswater, Knock and Loop rivers as well as 5 km of remediated watercourses, 16 km of footpaths and cycleways and 13 ha of park space. The Greenway is now

widely used by communities across East Belfast and, as part of the CCG construction, the East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme (EBFAS) achieved its goal to protect 1700 properties from flooding risk. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has also reported an ecological and environmental improvement in the Connswater river system. The project was initiated from a 2005 Needs Analysis carried out by the EastSide Partnership (which later led the consortium), but eventually expanded to include significant flood alleviation measures after serious floods in 2007 and 2008. During the development, the Partnership prioritised work

on ecosystem recovery, supporting residents' health and wellbeing and activities to support community engagement, education and empowerment. This work continues to develop, alongside a series of detailed monitoring and evaluation studies. One of these studies found that "for every £1.00 invested in the greenway, there would be approximately £2.00–6.00 returned. ...after approximately ten years the greenway should pay for itself."

In 2019 the [EastSide Greenways Concept Plan](#) was developed and

developed and launched with a number of key stakeholders to ensure momentum and influence from CCG was used to catalyse further benefits. The concept plan aims to develop a partnership to scope potential of other greenspaces in the wider East Belfast region; connecting transport networks, tourist hotspots and community spaces through a series of greenways and network hubs.



Connswater River



Spotlight on Influence and Empowerment

EastSide Partnership says that the initial idea for regeneration of this neglected area came from the community itself, with initial designs drawn up many years before 2005. However, this vision became a reality only with good engagement and influential leadership. Wendy Langham, who led the project, saw the benefits, but also understood that the scale of the challenge meant the project could only be achieved through partnership, both with the local community and relevant major agencies. Social empowerment and Infrastructure improvement were at the core of the project from the beginning, particularly focusing on issues of disconnection, derelict space, regeneration and a lack of social spaces. Belfast City Council

played a major role in the delivery of the project, and importantly, it recognised that if CCG was to work, it had to be developed in collaboration with the community, due to complex social needs of the area. Young people are now one of the biggest users of greenway, and there is now so much buy-in that many events in the newly created C.S Lewis Square are no longer only run by the partnership but by local community groups and event organisers. EastSide Partnership is seeking to further empower locals by setting up a skills and employability development programme, including recruiting 15 young people to work with over a 2-year period, building personal skills and confidence in areas like horticulture, landscaping, and bike maintenance, and work continues on using



Urban market in CS Lewis Square

the CCG for outdoor education programmes on Climate and Nature with local educators. Development of the complex partnership of City Council, government departments, EastSide Partnership and the private sector, was helped by influence of local political representatives such as Sammy Douglas, who the partnership says provided a strong community voice. This developed into vocal support at the highest levels, from the first and deputy first ministers of Northern Ireland. The Partnership recognises the importance of continued influence and engagement, which has driven creation of the EastSide Greenways concept plan, and participation in two major monitoring projects with Queen's University Belfast, to quantify and showcase what the impact has been and how the benefits could be replicated for the wider region.



Community playground on the Greenway



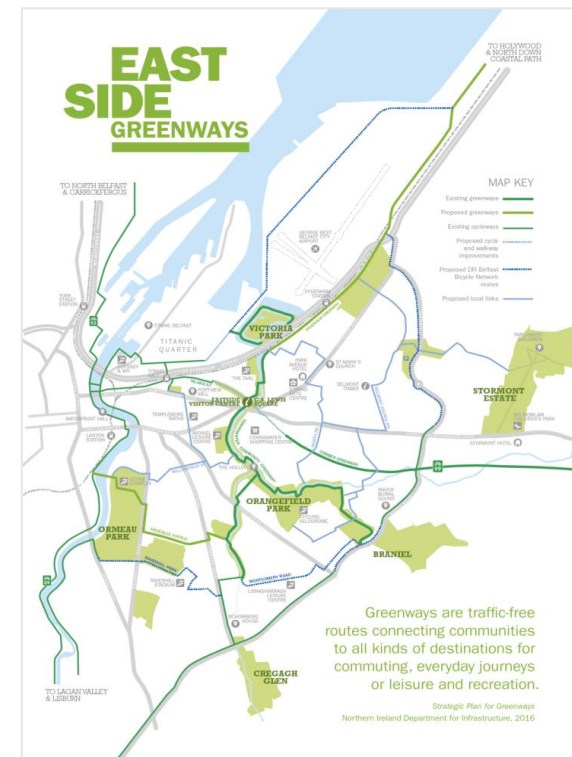
Spotlight on Collaboration and Building strong governance and supporting structures

The Greenway regeneration was a complex project with multiple partners and funding sources. EastSide Partnership received the main body of funding in 2007 from the National Lottery, which allowed them to leverage money from other public bodies. Connswater Community Greenway Trust was set up to oversee the work moving forward, and it had its own skilled and agile board focussing on the development of the project. The Trust was rebranded and changed to 'EastSide Greenways' after 2017. The larger statutory agencies were able to fill resource gaps in a number of key areas, and partners saw the benefits of working with EastSide Partnership, as experts in engaging the local community. A range of other private sector partners have also stated the benefits of this holistic and deep

engagement approach, which now informs their future processes.

EastSide Partnership recognises that the project would have struggled to have been awarded the National Lottery money if Belfast City Council and other major partners were not on board. In particular, it couldn't have committed to the upkeep of the 16km Greenway. This took the form of a legal Memorandum of Understanding agreement between EastSide Partnership and Belfast City Council, which signed up to manage and maintain the greenway to a certain standard for no less than 40 years, in collaboration with EastSide Greenways. A remainder of the total funding has been reserved as an endowment to keep the organisation going, with the long-term goal of animating the greenway to give people community ownership, and make the area a thriving, living landmark. The oversight of this maintenance arrangement takes the form of several monthly and quarterly meetings with the council neighbourhood services department. The Partnership

notes that keeping the momentum of a complex partnership can be challenging, and it takes constant work to keep communication channels operating well both across agencies, and also within each partner organisation. However, it notes that the results are well worth the effort.



A map of Greenways in the Belfast Area



Spotlight on Funding and People

The National Lottery 'Living Landmark Programme' funding came at the right time. EastSide Partnership had to use its limited staff resource to drive work through a 2-year application process, but they were rewarded with £23 million of funding, which leveraged £17 million from partners in Belfast City Council, Department of Communities and Department for Infrastructure. According to the Partnership, the development of the consortium took significant time and effort, but a particular breakthrough came when Department for Communities seconded a staff member as Community Engagement Officer, who worked with EastSide Partnership for 10 years until the project was delivered. EastSide Partnership began this work with a small team of 4 full-time staff, made up of the Project Manager, Communications and Marketing Officer, Tourism Arts and Heritage Officer and

the secondee from Department for Communities. The team has changed since completion of the construction phase. At one time the team included an event manager role, but this soon changed to a more holistic Community officer role.

Handling the amount of money raised for the project proved to be a significant challenge, and Belfast City Council undertook many of the administrative roles which the small partnership team could not, such as processing finances and liaising with contractors. The oversight of the partnership proved useful when problems arose with the quality of work by the initial project contractor who had to be replaced. Volunteers are the beating heart of the Partnership and recognising this, the team have now added a volunteer coordinator role with 2 related roles for the Managing and management support of the Greenway. There are also 5 'greenway leaders' who work part-time as they are needed, to lead actions such as walking tours and litter picks.



Walking bridge along the Greenway



Litter picking on the Greenway



Spotlight on Co-developing and maintaining the evidence base and Monitoring & Evaluation

What originated as a local idea, needed to be co-developed with communities and experts, making use of a range of data sources. For example, EastSide partnership partnered with an NGO called Belfast Healthy Cities to look at what local data was available and putting together a Health Impact Assessment for the project. A range of forums were held in community centres to communicate and receive information and volunteers attended meetings in community centres and visited homes. A communications and marketing officer was hired to add to this push, and initiatives included door to door surveys, regular meetings and a newsletter. Although the Greenway project received funding in 2007, serious local flooding on a number of occasions over

the next 5 years led to discussions with the Department for Infrastructure about integrating plans for flood alleviation with CCG. The floods were a catalyst for linking the two projects at a time where construction was beginning and consultation underway. A separate business case was required from DfI officials for the flood alleviation element, but on the ground the projects were delivered as one. This involved incorporating designs to move the river into existing CCG designs. Queen's University Belfast identified CCG as important because of the size of project, and funding was found for the PARC Study which analysed information on a wide range of socio-economic and environmental factors. Researcher Ruth Hunter was based in the EastSide Partnership office a couple of days a week. She has since found funding for the Groundswell project, which will continue to understand the financial and wider economic payback of the project.

Find Out More

Visit the Website at:

<https://www.eastsidegreenways.com>

Email at:

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Tools:

[Breakdown of Monitoring and Evaluation results](#)

[Development of Eastside Greenways Concept Plan](#)



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