

Supporting community engagement in flood risk management - South Tyneside**1. SUMMARY**

The Local Environmental Action Fund (LEAF) at the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland aims to support projects that address environmental issues at a local level. The River Don project was part of Durham Wildlife Trust's (DWT) wider Living Waterways project, which seeks to develop sustainable solutions to flood risk on major rivers and their tributaries. DWT was awarded a grant from LEAF in 2012 to enable it to focus on the mitigation of localised flooding on the River Don where it passes through the urban area of West Boldon in South Tyneside, North East England. The local area has been subject to flood events in the past and has been identified as a high flood risk area by the Environment Agency's Flood Risk Maps and the Flood Risk Assessment carried out by the local council.

This project involved the active participation of the local community in the creation and management of a backwater pond on the River Don at West Boldon that now acts as an overflow area for flood water when river levels rise. Backwaters are a known method of sustainable flood prevention and are encouraged by the 'Make Space for Water' strategy endorsed by DEFRA. They store water during times of high flow, therefore reducing the amount in the main river channel and reducing flood risk downstream. Although they do not completely eradicate the risk of flooding in any given area, they serve an important role in slowing down the flow and preventing flash flooding downstream. Backwaters are also a vitally important refuge for wildlife.

This case study outlines the activities that were undertaken to implement local and natural solutions to flood risks, by actively engaging the local community to take ownership in a project that both benefits local residents and also local wildlife. It would be informative for organisations that are looking to actively engage local communities in action to mitigate and adapt to potential local flood risks.

2. ACTIVITIES

- The creation of the backwater started with a prolonged activity of consultation with the local community through three consultation drop-in events, two community fun days, a leaflet drop and door knocking exercise. It was mainly young families who attended consultations, either because they were concerned about safety or because they wanted to know how their children could get involved in the education side of the project.



Various partnership meetings were also held between the local council, voluntary sector organisations, the Environment Agency, schools, residents groups and businesses.

- The physical installation of the backwater was carried out in part by contractors in March 2012, with volunteers helping to plant up the new backwater. The consultation events enabled the local community to input on the design and location of the backwater. As a result of the consultation, the original designs of the feature were changed in response to an issue with the proximity of one of the two backwaters to homes. In the end, the one in closest proximity to people's homes was taken out of the plans, and the other made larger. The consultations also promoted monthly volunteer litter picks and sessions with local schools.
- Monthly river clean ups involving local volunteers, including those from the local youth project and local supermarket employees, were organised to remove blockages and rubbish from water channels. These were complemented by otter and water vole survey training that have further enhanced people's knowledge of local wildlife conservation.
- A range of outdoor and indoor school education sessions, and public events including a Family Fun Day all helped to raise awareness and recruit volunteers throughout the project.
- Local schools close to the backwater were encouraged to use the area as a learning and education resource that directly linked into the National Curriculum in primary and secondary schools.

Partners:

- A broad range of partners were involved, including local communities, local primary and secondary schools, the Environment Agency, local councils and Councilors, Durham Wildlife Trust and local police and fire officers.

Length of time:

- A year of public engagement and consultation to secure support and permissions occurred before the groundworks for the backwater were carried out in March 2012. Follow up community events and educational activities occurred over the course of 2012.

Funding:

- The Living Waterways project overall was managed by a full-time officer funded by the Environment Agency. The River Don project officer was therefore funded by Environment Agency funds. The actual project costs of £19,709 were supported by a grant from LEAF.

3. OUTCOMES

- Flood risk impact: The volume of water the river can hold has increased as a result of the backwater, thus reducing the flood risk to houses downstream. The backwater has already been tested with great success in March 2012, when the region experienced major flash flooding.
- Wildlife impact: the backwater has also created a refuge area and new habitats to support a thriving water vole population and a secluded and stable environment for fish, otters, insects and birds.
- 300 children and 100 adults were involved directly. This includes over 200 local residents indirectly involved through clean ups and raising flood awareness events, developing a greater understanding of the River Don. Non-residents included volunteers from the wider area who were working on other Wildlife Trust projects, as well as employees of some organisations who worked in the local area but lived further afield.
- Volunteer activity days have enabled people to meet new friends, keep fit, learn about their local river and develop new skills. The latter has meant that people are more aware of the importance of keeping the river clean, have a sense of ownership and are more likely to take care of it for future generations to enjoy. Some of the volunteers that came on board during the project still volunteer with the Trust today in a range of locations and for a number of different projects.
- The direct involvement of the schools, youth groups and local residents has created a greater sense of ownership for the river itself and the surrounding area. Pupils have developed an awareness of the wildlife local to them and how pollution can affect both humans and animals. There was a noticeable reduction of litter in and around the river.



4. BARRIERS

- Some elements of the project application had to be amended as a result of the site – the location of water vole burrows in the area meant that the original plans of having two backwaters had to be changed to just installing one larger one. The initial plans also included installing a pond dipping platform to provide safe access and observation for local school children and visitors. However, this element of the project did not go ahead as the Environment Agency thought that the platform might increase flood risk. As a result LEAF worked with DWT to re-allocate the grant underspend to awareness raising and community engagement elements of the project.

- While local residents were actively engaged in volunteering each month, despite the high level of community consultation, numbers were lower than DWT expected. Additional media coverage prior to events is one way that this could be overcome.

5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ✓ **Do:** spend the time initially getting local residents involved in every part of the project from the very beginning so they can build a sense of community ownership.
- ✓ **Do:** use local media to raise awareness of the project and gain support from the community
- ✓ **Do:** work with pupils in the local schools and youth groups so that the next generation of local residents will take more ownership of it in the future.
- ✓ **Do:** be prepared to be flexible as a funder and work with your grantees to find solutions to local situations.

6. LINKS

The Community Foundation is a charity that champions giving to make a difference to people and communities in the North East and provided a grant from the Local Environmental Action Fund (LEAF) to the project in this case study. <http://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/knowledge-and-leadership/local-environmental-action-fund>

Read more about the work done by Wildlife Trusts to restore rivers, including Living Waterways. <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/restoringrivers#Living>

7. CONTACTS

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Otter footprints at the backwater. All photos courtesy of Durham Wildlife Trust.