ERDF - PA6
Summative Assessment
Habitat Cheltenham Project

INTRODUCTION

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Habitat Cheltenham project was awarded European Regional Development Funding (ERDF), under Priority Axis 6 (preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency), as a result of a successful application to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government)'s OC11R16P 0483 call published in December 2016.

The call offered a minimum £500,000 and maximum £2,000,000 to activity specifically focused on developing ecological networks, green infrastructure, and/or natural water management solutions within Gloucestershire's urban and urban fringe areas. The call noted, in 2016, that Gloucestershire's natural environment faced challenges in rural, urban-fringe and urban settings and that there was much to be done to meet biodiversity, air quality, and other environmental targets. The call anticipated that activity supported by ERDF could improve urban and urban fringe areas by increasing biodiversity and restoring degraded ecosystem services and asked that proposed project activities specifically result in C23 outputs - habitats with improved conservation status.

In response, Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) presented the 'Creating and Connecting Habitat and Enhancing Flood Resilience - Central Cheltenham' project, now known simply as the 'Habitat Cheltenham' project. The proposal aimed to create new and connect existing habitat in central Cheltenham, thereby increasing biodiversity and enhancing the flood resilience of a very urban environment.

The project strategy was to build small scale 'nature refuges' throughout Cheltenham's urban core, these refuges were intended to be positioned close enough together to form a chain or network allowing species migration, linking each refuge into a single sustainable system. The newly established network was to be linked to existing edge-of-town green spaces. The green spaces were also to be treated with biodiversity enhancing measures.

The proposed project outputs intended to enhance habitats for the benefit of:

- **Insects and birds** - establishing mini-habitats planted with species providing food sources and nesting cover for the life cycles of the target species
- **Town centre businesses, visitors, and residents** - delivering better flood resilience for the central area, providing the town centre with a Green Infrastructure framework as key measure to improve air quality, and making Cheltenham more attractive for a highly skilled workforce, inward investment and as a tourism and visitor economy destination.
- **Resident and visitor wellbeing** - creating places more that would be more attractive for walking and cycling.

The Habitat Cheltenham project was awarded £635,448 of publicly matched funding, made up of £516,978 for capital expenditure and £118,470 for revenue expenditure. The total project costs were determined as £1,270,896. Managed by Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) the final timescale agreed for delivery of the project was 01 October 2017 to 31 December 2020.

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

This report, which forms Stage 3 of the ERDF requirements for reporting and communicating project outcomes and impact, seeks to provide insights into project performance, assessing the:

- continued relevance and consistency of the project;
- progress of the project against proposed and contractual targets;
- experience of delivering and managing the project;
- economic impact attributable to the project; and
- cost-effectiveness of the project and hence its value for money.

The assessment concludes with a summary of the key lessons for:

- Cheltenham Borough Council - should they expand the existing or embark on a new yet similar project.
- Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities - for future programme development and delivery.

The assessment was carried out by a third-party assessor, using a mix of the following:

Desk-top research and literature review - The third-party assessor accessed and reviewed the following documents and details:

- The original call (OC11R16P 0483) published in December 2016
- The Grant Funding Agreement between, the then, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the CBC, including the attached full application and appendices on output and spend profiles and the original ecologist report
- Project Change Request documentation
- E-Claims - the online platform through which the project submits financial and output claims to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for approval and payment
- Stage 1 - summative assessment planning documents
- Stage 2 - data collection and reporting details and evidence, including testimonials
- Project management documentation, including meeting minutes
- Before and after photographs depicting implementation of initiatives
- Maintenance plans
- Project web pages, social media sites (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr)

Informal, semi-structured interviews - The third-party assessor completed semi-structured interviews with key project staff, and relevant stakeholders, including:

- Sophie Barton: Project Manager (including for Habitat Cheltenham)
- Marta Cowling: Urban Designer and Landscape Architect (Habitat Cheltenham Project Support Officer)
- Jackie Jobes: Townscape Manager (Habitat Cheltenham Project Manager – maternity leave)
- Tracey Birkinshaw: Director of Community and Economic Development (Habitat Cheltenham Project Sponsor)
- Adam Reynolds: Green Space Manager (Habitat Cheltenham project maintenance)
- Roger Mortlock, CEO, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

Questions included:

- Establishing the interviewee's role/connection with the Habitat Cheltenham project
- Exploring how the delivery of the Habitat Cheltenham project evolved over the delivery period
- Gathering perceptions of benefits, outcomes, and impact of the Habitat Cheltenham project for CBC, and for the GFirst LEP area
- Gathering perceptions on the challenges faced in delivering the Habitat Cheltenham project
- Understanding lessons learned

In addition, a **semi-structured workshop session** was held with the delivery team at CBC to garner opinions on how any changes in external context influences project delivery, to gather opinions on quality and effectiveness of project management, and to understand lessons learned.

Site visit - The third-party assessor carried out a site visit on 3 May 2023 to verify that the implemented initiatives, as described in project documentation and depicted in photographs, were still in place at the time of writing this report.

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SECTION 1: PROJECT CONTEXT

1.1 RATIONALE FOR DELIVERY

The context: In 2016, according to call OC11R16P 0483 which was intrinsically linked to the Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (GFirst) European Union Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) strategy, and the Opportunities and Threats to the Local Economy from Environmental Dependencies LEED Toolkit Level 2 Report for GFirst Local Enterprise Partnership, published in 2014, there was a county-level need in Gloucestershire to:

- further exploit Gloucestershire's natural environment, already one of the county's greatest assets
- improve the local environment to ensure it could act as a catalyst to local economic growth; it was anticipated that an improved environment would attract inward investment, increase visitor spend, reduce the cost of adverse environmental conditions to communities and businesses, improve health, and generate employment.
- improve urban and urban fringe areas of Gloucestershire by increasing biodiversity and restoring degraded ecosystem services in those areas not in receipt of, or eligible for, Countryside Stewardship scheme funding or supported by other agri-environment programmes.

At a town-level, there was a need or desire to:

- **Create a habitat network** - providing a cross-town link between out-of-town green spaces, increasing the insect population to encourage predators and higher trophic organisms; creating a functioning ecosystem within the urban environment.

- **Live up to reputation** - in 2016, there were circa ten street trees left within the central town area, this was considered to contradict Cheltenham's reputation as a 'green and verdant' town; a more biodiverse town centre needed creating.
- **Deliver better flood resilience** - reducing impermeable surfaces and the consequential reduction of surface water run-off, particularly a requirement as Cheltenham was badly affected by flooding in 2007.
- **Improve air quality** - the whole Borough of Cheltenham is designated an Air Quality Management Area, in 2016 the worst air quality was associated with town centre traffic; the area needed a Green Infrastructure framework.
- **Support economic development in Cheltenham** - research had shown that well managed green spaces increase the chance of inward investment and support, in general, a healthy economy. The desire was to make Cheltenham more attractive for a highly skilled workforce, inward investment and as a tourism and visitor economy destination by improving the visual amenity of the most urban parts of the town.
- **Improve resident and visitor wellbeing** - creating places more attractive for walking and cycling.

At a species-level, there was a need or desire to:

- Ensure a particular focus on improving habitat for **solitary bee species**; solitary bees were recognised by CBC as an important pollinator that needed support as numbers were in decline.

Market failures: The following market failures were identified within the projects Logic Model document:

- Lack of recognition of the importance of urban habitats
- Lack of habitat for biodiversity in the town centre
- Lack of flood resilience features
- Poor air quality
- Recognition that, without intervention and the integration of multi-functional green infrastructure features into the heart of the town centre, vital and valuable economic, social, and environmental benefits will not be achieved.

Rationale for the project: In direct response to call OC11R16P 0483, the GFirst ESIF Strategy and the market failures identified, the Habitat Cheltenham project aimed to:

- Protect and restore biodiversity and soil by rehabilitating land and enhancing habitat
- Promote eco system services and green infrastructure to enhance flood resilience and wellbeing of residents and visitors.

What was the project seeking to do?:
The project strategy was to build small scale 'nature refuges' throughout Cheltenham's urban core, for example, at the Minster grounds. These refuges were intended to be positioned close enough together to form a chain or network allowing species migration, linking each refuge into a single sustainable system. The newly established network was to be linked to existing edge-of-town green spaces including Sandford Park, Cheltenham Walk and the Honeybourne Line. The green spaces were also to be treated with biodiversity enhancing measures. Intervention activities, which were divided into 31 mini-projects, were to include:

1) **Introducing varied mowing regimes**, with **plug planting and seeding of flowers** some areas left fallow to regenerate naturally, and other's mown less frequently to allow wildflowers and herbaceous plants to regenerate
2) **Introducing selective tree and shrub management** - creating areas of shade and sunlit glade
3) **Constructing hibernacula**, mini-log piles, log stacks contained in gabions to give protection from human interference where more visible, and small earth bunds for ground nesting bees – it was intended that some of these measures would be incorporated into features such as benches or sited near play areas or picnic areas.
4) **Building raingardens** – below ground and in raised beds
5) **Building timber edge planters** within Minster Gardens
6) **Introducing beehives** in Minster Gardens as a special measure to support honeybees and as a measure to raise public awareness

7) **Creating green wall features**, these will be approximately 2m high, constructed from timber with soil pockets planted with climbing plants and small herbaceous plants.
8) **Tree planting**, particularly in and around car parks
9) **Introducing grass and herbaceous margins** alongside carriageways and footpaths to catch excess surface runoff during periods of heavy rainfall.

At the time of the full application, it was intended that these activities would deliver:

- 3 hectares of rehabilitated land (C22 output)
- 97 hectares of habitats with improved conservation status (C23 output)

Appropriateness of the project: In the 2016 context, the project and the programme delivery model were appropriately designed to achieve overall objectives. The targets set for the project were also considered realistic and achievable. The forecasting approach for deliverables was based on a Gloucestershire Centre for Environmental Records (GCER) survey and a biodiversity audit (delivered in 2008). The audit was commissioned by the Green Spaces Department of CBC to investigate the biodiversity present within the parks of the town and, although 10 years old at the time of the full application, as very few management changes had occurred since it was written, it was still considered an accurate representation of biodiversity needs in Cheltenham and the recommended intervention - to create a habitat network - still appropriate and desirable.

1.2 RELEVANCE AND CONSISTENCY

The Habitat Cheltenham project experienced two key changes in global and national context:

1. **Brexit** - Following a politically challenging and lengthy negotiation process, including two snap-elections, on 31 January 2020 the UK withdrew from the European Union (EU). As was anticipated, there followed an exodus of European workers and a large decline in immigration from countries in the European Economic Area (EEA) to the UK.

   For the environmental sector**,** having less access to European staff and increased issues importing goods from Europe, meant increased costs and reduced availability of products and materials. For the Habitat Cheltenham project, Brexit meant:
   - Cost per m2 intervention output rose significantly.

2. **Covid-19 Pandemic** - First identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. As a result, the UK government introduced public health and economic measures, including new laws, to mitigate its impact. The first national lockdown began on 23 March 2020 and lasted until May 2020. Further nationwide restrictions were introduced later in 2020 and into 2021. All restrictions were eventually lifted, in England, by March 2022. As a result, the UK experienced two years of uncertainty, with business-as-usual yet to fully resume for some by August 2022. For the Habitat Cheltenham project, the Covid-19 pandemic meant:
   - Maintenance of project sites was difficult, particularly during the first six months of the pandemic where lockdowns coincided with unseasonably hot weather – several young plants were lost and required replacing (at additional cost).
   - Match funding had to be redefined - all available funds were used by CBC to reactively respond to the pandemic. Once a sense of normality returned, the project team needed to reallocate internal funding to ensure adequate match funding remained available for the final year of the project.
   - Supply of plant plugs, hardy shrubs, timber, and construction materials proved difficult and cost per m2 intervention output, again, rose significantly.

Overall, in May 2023 project activities continue to be as relevant as they were in 2016.

SECTION 2: PROJECT PROGRESS

2.1 SPEND AND OUTPUT PERFORMANCE

In 2018, the Habitat Cheltenham project was awarded an ERDF allocation of £635,448; £516,978 towards eligible capital expenditure, and £118,470 towards eligible revenue expenditure. With public match funding of £356,460, the total project expenditure was determined in contracted budget version 1 as £1,270,896.

Managed by Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC), the final timescale agreed for delivery of the project was 01 October 2017 to 31 January 2021. During the agreed 40-month project, the following outputs were contracted for delivery:

- C22: Total surface area of rehabilitated land = 3 hectares
- C23: Surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status = 97 hectares

Over the course of the project (to, the extended completion date, March 2023), three project change requests (PCRs) were submitted reprofiling ERDF allocation, delivery timescales, and delivery activities. These changes and the ultimate project delivery and outputs are detailed below.

2.2 EXPENDITURE

The full application, as attached to the Grant Funding Agreement, requested £635,448 as match to £635,448 public funding from CBC for a total project expenditure of £1,270,896. The expenditure was split across the following categories:

- Building and Construction - £962,555
- Professional Fees - £71,402
- Salaries - £236,939

Over the project lifetime, three project change requests (PCRs) were submitted, reprofiling expenditure.

The first PCR, approved in April 2021, requested an extension to the project completion date to recapture implementation time lost during Covid-19 lockdowns, but did not suggest expenditure would be impacted.

The second PCR, approved in October 2022, sought to adjust funds in all cost categories, increasing total project expenditure, by £2,743.81, to £1,273,639.81. The rationale presented in PCR 2 was that, following full review of the whole project in terms of finances, outputs, timescales, and deliverability, and given that CBC staff continued to be redeployed to support Covid-19 pandemic recovery, changes were needed to rationalise the delivery programme and work packages via a recovery plan. This plan increased overall expenditure by c£3k, and reprofiled spend from build and construction to professional fees to acknowledge a need to outsource some works. Following PCR 2, expenditure was split as follows across the project cost categories:

- Building and Construction - £886,624.43
- Professional Fees - £146,671.50
- Salaries - £240,343.88

The third PCR, approved in January 2023, was submitted because the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic had far reaching consequences into the 2021/22 financial year and saw CBC launching from a substantially reduced budget base due to lost income; the Council's Covid Recovery Strategy resulted in budgets, that had been put aside for delivery of ERDF, either being re-directed to support Cheltenham communities or integrated into public realm projects that had been postponed or cancelled. It was suggested that unprecedented shortages, delays and increased prices of materials and labour, and the added financial strain because of the energy crisis, meant CBC was no longer in a suitable financial position to fund significant infrastructure schemes. As such, CBC further rationalised the programme – removing larger scale infrastructure interception such as rain gardens, to ensure they were able to deliver within the acceptable -15% variance factor and within agreed timescales. As a result, PCR 3 sought to reduce overall expenditure by 29%, £363,924.35 predominantly from the building and construction cost category, to £906,971.65.

Following PCR 3, expenditure was split as follows across the project cost categories:

- Building and Construction - £517,621.79
- Professional Fees - £153,194.51
- Salaries - £236,155.35

Table 1 (below), taken as a snapshot from EClaims following the submission of the project's final claim form (Q1 2023), shows the budget balance against these revised cost categories.

Table 1: Claim Q1 2023 – Final Breakdown by Cost Category

Expenditure Type	Cost Category	Contracted Amount	Expenditure Claimed to Date (excluding this Claim)	Expenditure on this Claim	Total Expenditure to Date	Budget Balance
Capital	(Cap) Building and Construction	£517,621.79	£513,544.29	£0.00	£513,544.29	£4,077.50
Capital	(Cap) Fees	£153,194.51	£153,194.51	£0.00	£153,194.51	£0.00
Subtotal Capital		**£670,816.30**	**£666,738.80**	**£0.00**	**£666,738.80**	**£4,077.50**
Revenue	(Rev) Salaries	£236,155.35	£236,939.00	£0.00	£236,939.00	(£783.65)
Subtotal Revenue		**£236,155.35**	**£236,939.00**	**£0.00**	**£236,939.00**	**(£783.65)**
Total		**£906,971.65**	**£903,677.80**	**£0.00**	**£903,677.80**	**£3,293.85**

Table 2 (below) provides an overview of the Habitat Cheltenham projects' final financial performance, against the original and adjusted expenditure targets.

Table 2: Expenditure Table at Project Closure

Indicator	Targets		Performance at Time of Evaluation		Projected Performance at Project Closure		Overall Assessment
	Original	Adjusted (PCR 3)	Expenditure to date	% of Adjusted Target	Projected expenditure	% of Adjusted Target	
ERDF Capital Expenditure (£)	£1,033,957	£670,816.30	£666,738.80	99.39%	£666,738.80	99.39%	While the project delivered just 71% of the original expenditure target, appropriate and timely project change requests were submitted, in the wake of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, to decrease expenditure. The project successfully met its adjusted expenditure targets.
ERDF Revenue Expenditure (£)	£236,939	£236,155.35	£236,939.00	99.67%	£236,939.00	99.67%	

At project close, when compared to the adjusted expenditure targets as defined in PCR 3, a very minor underspend (0.61%) was seen for the capital cost category and an even smaller, 0.33%, overspend was seen for the revenue cost category (£783.65). Overall, at project closure, there was a combined, very insignificant, total underspend of 0.36% (£3,293.85).

2.3 ACTIVITY

The Habitat Cheltenham project aimed to deliver the following activities, divided into 31 mini-projects:

- Introducing varied mowing regimes, with plug planting and seeding of flowers
- Introducing selective tree and shrub management - creating areas of shade and sunlit glade
- Constructing hibernacula, including some measures incorporated into features e.g., benches
- Building raingardens - below ground and in raised beds
- Building timber edge planters within Minster Gardens

- Introducing beehives in Minster Gardens
- Creating green wall features
- Tree planting, particularly in and around car parks
- Introducing grass and herbaceous margins alongside carriageways and footpaths

According to the full application, most activities were to be delivered at the following locations:

- Winston Churchill Memorial Gardens
- Lower High Street
- Main High Street (including Boots Corner)
- Bath Road
- Berkeley Gardens
- In areas associated with the Cheltenham Transport Plan
- Minster Gardens
- Car Parks - Bath Parade, Sherborne Place, Rodney Road and High Street West, St James Street and High Street
- Honeybourne Way roundabouts
- Chelt Walk
- The Long Gardens

Following PCR 3, activities to build raingardens, create green wall features, and introduce beehives were removed from the project scope. This in turn meant that the Lower High Street, Main High Street, Boots Corner, Bath Road, areas associated with the Transport Plan, car parks (apart from High Street car park), and Long Gardens locations were removed from the project. However, to help maintain output delivery, the Honeybourne Gateway area and St George's car park were added.

All remaining activities were successfully delivered at the remaining locations (and the Honeybourne Gateway area and St George's car park), albeit that activities previously divided into 31 sub projects were consolidated into 14 more comprehensive programmes of work.

Map 1 (below) depicts the 2.113 hectares of habitats with improved conservation status that CBC stated would be achieved as a result of implementing the planned intervention activities, and highlights the connectivity achieved between existing green spaces.

Map 1: 97 hectares of habitats with improved conservation status

The project team have a wealth of photographs capturing activities listed at the agreed site areas before and after the interventions were implemented.

Varied mowing regimes, with plug planting and seeding of flowers

Example photographs depict, from the 1,910m^2 total area of plug planted and seeded ground, areas of the Winston Churchill Memorial Gardens before preparation for wildflower meadow planting and after the meadow was seeded and the first bloom of flowers. Also depicted are Royall Well, Honeybourne Way, and the Honeybourne Gateway before and after new grass cutting regimes were implemented:

Before…

After…

Selective tree and shrub management

Example photographs depict before images of the overgrown vegetation along the Market Street border of the Winston Churchill Memorial Gardens and after images showing vegetation was removed, creating a space for an orchard, and allowing remaining trees to flourish. Additional images depict the works undertaken at Berkely Gardens to introduce new shrubs and better manage trees:

Before…

After…

Constructing hibernacula

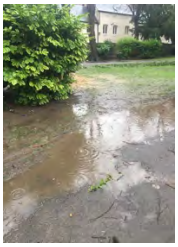
In total six hibernacula were constructed, including those embedded in four bench seats, one semi-circular seating area and an additional seating area within the Minster Gardens. Example photographs depict hibernacula backing onto new planting areas and installed into new bench seating areas:

After…

Timber edge planters within Minster Gardens

Example photographs depict before and after images of works carried out in Minster Gardens. Planting, other than in bench planters, did not end up being placed in timber edge planters; the CBC team decided that the space worked better with a more natural planting scheme and planted into the ground rather than raised edge planter boxes:

Before…



After…

Tree planting, particularly in and around car parks (but including roundabouts)

In total, 26 new trees were planted, species included multi-stem Amelanchier lamarckii, Irish Yews, Betula pendula (native silver birch), Pyrus calleryana 'Chanticleer', Quercus Frainetto, Taxus baccata 'Fastigiata' and multi-stem hazel. Example photographs depict before and after pictures of the High Street car park, St Georges car park, Montpelier Roundabout, and Millbrook Roundabout:

Before…

After…

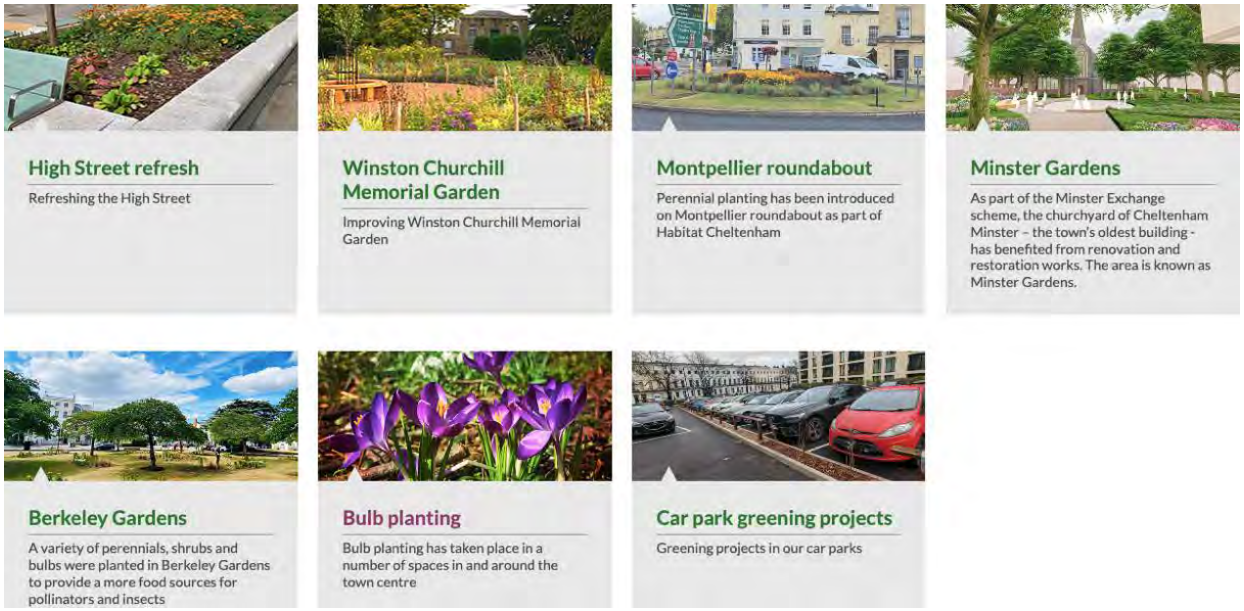
Introducing grass and herbaceous margins alongside carriageways and footpaths

Example photographs depict before and after pictures of the entrance to the Winston Churchill Memorial Garden, the entrance to the St Marys Mission Building, Chelt Walk, Willoughby Triangle, Suffolk Square, and the High Street:

Before…

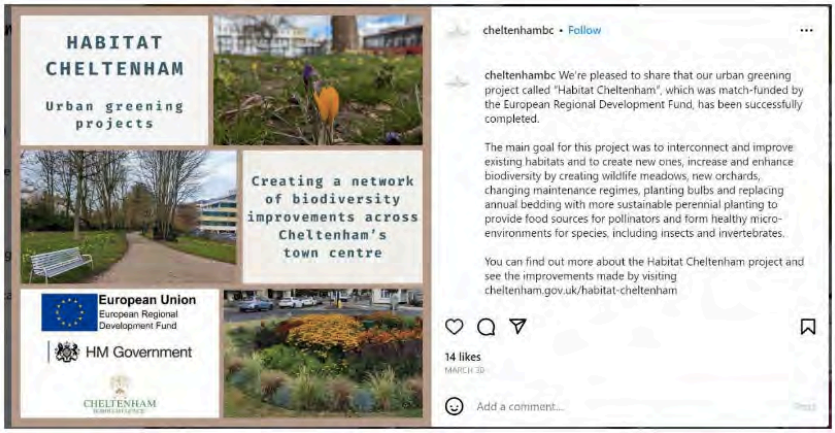
After…

In addition, the project's **dedicated website page** can be found here: https://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/info/85/habitat_cheltenham. It includes an overview of the project as well as links to learn more about the various interventions.



CBC used their **social media** platforms to promote project activities:

- facebook.com/cheltbc
- twiiter.com/cheltenhamBC
- instagram.com/cheltenhambc/
- flickr.com/photos/cheltenhamboroughcouncil
- youtube.com/user/cheltenhamborough



CBC also created a **short film** to promote and celebrate its activities at Minster Gardens:

- https://youtu.be/L8pDFNt_2pY.

All promotional activities reviewed as part of the summative assessment research contained reference to the ERDF funding and/or contained appropriate EU-ERDF logos.

2.4 OUTPUT TARGETS

Of the three project change requests (PCRs) submitted over the project lifetime, two reprofiled project output targets.

PCR 2 reprofiled outputs as follows:

- C22: Total surface area of rehabilitated land = 0
- C23: Surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status = 2.48 hectares

The rationale for the removal of C22 outputs was that, whilst deemed appropriate at the time, the original outputs detailed in the full application were calculated incorrectly. After the project started, revised guidance and clarification was issued by the managing authority for C22 and C23 outputs. Consequently, as they are no longer a requirement in the more developed region, this project will not be delivering any C22 outputs. In addition, the clarification for C23 outputs reduces the reliance on the ecologist report to determine a future, potential biodiversity improvement across a large, undefined area and instead focuses on improvements to a defined area of existing habitat(s) - this was previously thought of as C22.

CBC also reduced the hectarage of surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status (previously C22 but revised to C23) by 0.27ha because, following the impact of Covid-19 on their ability to deliver some of the larger scale infrastructure interventions, CBC consolidated the original 31 mini projects into 14 larger ones.

PCR 3 then reprofiled outputs as follows:

- C22: Total surface area of rehabilitated land = 0
- C23: Surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status = 2.113 hectares

The rationale for further reducing the C23 output was that several outputs were still dependent on construction-heavy (non-ERDF) infrastructure projects going ahead, several of which were no longer going to be delivered by CBC within the ERDF project timescales because:

- The Covid-19 pandemic led to reduced budgets
- Construction material costs were at a 40 year high
- Infrastructure-focussed public realm projects were postponed

Table 3 (below) highlights that ultimately (revised) C23 outputs were successfully delivered. The independent assessor viewed many 'before and after' images, saw interventions first hand during a site visits, and reviewed a comprehensive management plan detailing how interventions will be cared for in the shorter and longer terms.

Table 3: Output Table

Indicator	Targets		Performance at Time of Evaluation		Projected Performance at Project Closure		Overall Assessment
	Original	Adjusted (as per PCR 3)	No.	% of adjusted target	No.	% of adjusted target	
C22: Total surface area of rehabilitated land	3ha	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
C23: Surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status	97ha	2.113ha	2.113ha	100%	2.113ha	100%	Habitat Cheltenham delivered 70% of outputs described at full application (if the original C22 output of 3ha is considered as the original C23 target, in line with changes described in PCR 2), and 100% of revised outputs, as set out in PCR 3. Given the necessary removal of large green infrastructure interventions, this is considered a successful result.

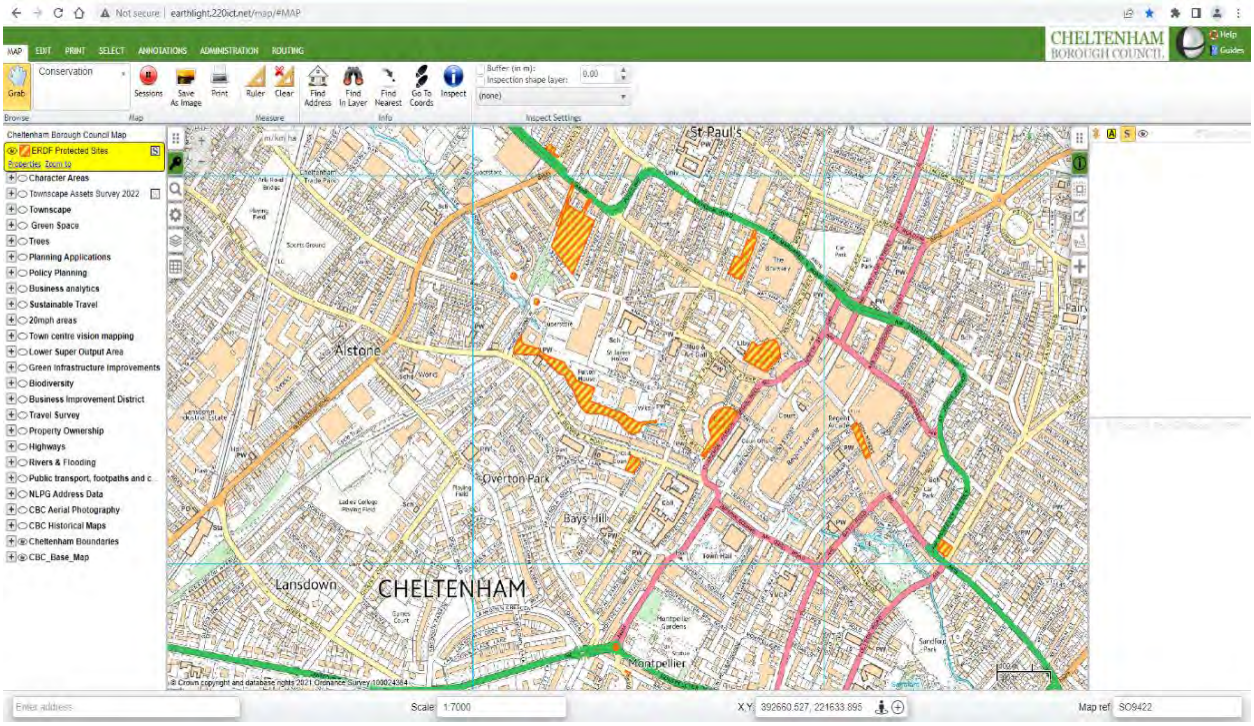
In addition to the photographic evidence of activity undertaken, verification of adjusted C23 outputs also requires there to be an up-to-date management plan that includes a commitment to the ongoing management of the site.

As noted above, the independent assessor reviewed a comprehensive management plan detailing how interventions will be cared for in the shorter and longer terms. The plan, which has been prepared by a qualified ecologist, reviewed by a management committee, and signed off at director level, includes:

- Clear overview of the ERDF project and the importance of maintaining interventions to a minimum of 2038
- Maps showing each of the mosaic sites and the interventions in place
- Links to original planting plans
- Details for how each intervention needs to be managed / cared for
- Details, in line with the funding agreement, for steps CBC need to take if any changes are proposed for any of the individual interventions or sites on which they are situated

In addition to the comprehensive management plan, amendments have been made to the CBC Earthlight mapping system. New 'flags' have been added to the sites in receipt of ERDF to ensure that those works are maintained for the minimum of the 15-year reference period, to 2038. Map 2 (below) shows a snapshot of the ERDF protected sites highlighted on the Earthlight system.

Map 2: Earthlight - ERDF Habitat Cheltenham protected sites



The CBC planning team and property department have also added the ERDF sites to their respective systems; 'Uniform' and Terrier commercial property management software. This is to ensure staff in other teams, not familiar with the Habitat Cheltenham project and not realising the significance of interventions, cannot inadvertently agree to changes to project sites.

The management plan and software systems support CBC in maintaining the sites in the short term, but also act as a safety net to ensure understanding and maintenance of ERDF funded interventions is not lost if the current team leave the Council.

2.5 PROJECT FORECAST

This summative assessment has been conducted post completion of the project, therefore the total number of outputs associated with the project will not change.

The maintenance plan and software systems in place provide confidence that interventions contributing towards C23 outputs will be maintained, and enhanced, over the next 15 years, to 2038.

SECTION 3: PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

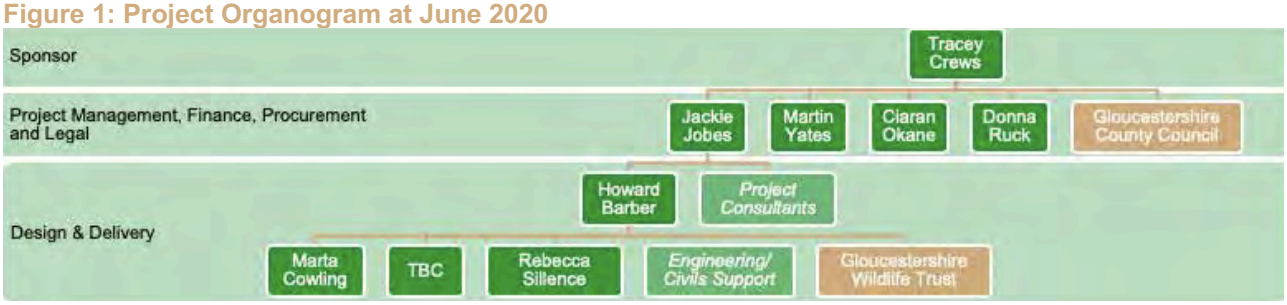
3.1 MANAGEMENT

Project management resource: Over the project lifetime the project team has undergone numerous changes; there have been three project managers and none of the original delivery team members, present at the start of the project, remain at CBC, except for Tracey Crews (now Birkinshaw), the project sponsor. While each project manager started consecutively, the lack of continuity in overall project resource over the years has led to missing files and gaps in information.

From the project start, in 2018, until June 2020, the project team, led by Howard Barber as project lead and project manager, was made up of Tracey Crews (now Birkinshaw) (project sponsor), Ken Dale (senior representative), Andrew Knott (finance) Geoff Beer (flood engineer), Harry Dennish and Catherine Haigh (project support officers), none of whom remain with CBC having left for other roles or retired.

In June 2020, when he left CBC, Jackie Jobes took the lead from Howard Barber as she had been line managing him. At the same time, Geoff Beer retired and was not replaced in the project and, following a period on long-term leave, Andrew Knott's place as finance partner was taken by Martin Yates. See the project organogram (Figure 1, below) for details. Howard, Geoff, and Andrew had been part of the initial full application submission and, with their departure, much of the project's historical details and understanding of ERDF regulations were lost. Later in 2020, Jane Stovell was appointed as project manager to support Jackie.

Figure 1: Project Organogram at June 2020



In 2021, Jackie took maternity leave; at this time, Jackie and Jane's roles were taken over by Sophie Barton (as project manager) and Marta Cowling (managing on site deliverables). In late 2022, Adam Reynolds (CBC Green Space Manager) stated working more closely with Sophie and Marta to ensure the ongoing upkeep and maintenance of project interventions post project closure.

Sophie, Marta, Jackie, and Adam agree that the role of the c30 community volunteers was greatly underestimated, in terms of resource and project promotion, at the project development / full application stage. Volunteers took on many of the smaller activities, particularly at the Winston Churchill Memorial Garden and Honeybourne Line. More information can be found about the volunteers here:

- www.govolunteerglos.org/o/Friends-of-Winston-Churchill-Memorial-Garden--Honeybourne-Line
- www.facebook.com/GreenSpaceVolunteers/?locale=en_GB

Project management and governance structures: Management and governance structures were clearly defined from the project outset in a project management plan developed by Howard Barber, the original project manager.

The CBC Director of Place and Growth was charged with project governance as the project sponsor; Tracey Birkinshaw was appointed to take responsibility for project control, ensuring:

- Internal monitoring was carried out through project boards
- The project team provided Highlight (status) reports monthly
- Finance officers provided regular financial statements to the project board
- If any significant changes occurred, that the finance officer consulted with the project manager
- Stage plans contained Gate reviews, milestones, and boundary points
- An up-to-date Decision Log was provided to the project board at each meeting
- A project closure report was commissioned

From 2020 onwards, many of these project control measures were abandoned. There was a senior level focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was agreed that, as there were clear plans in place for each site and PCR 2 had been approved, that project board meetings and monthly updates were unnecessary. Instead, the project manager was able to speak with the project sponsor whenever needed to discuss progress and identify any solutions to challenges.

3.2 DELIVERY

As noted in section 2.3, the key delivery activities, as described in the funding agreement (at PCR 3), have been successfully delivered. It is also considered that activities have been delivered to a good standard. Still, the project team felt that the delivery of the project could have been improved, providing eight key ideas:

1. **Streamlined project development** - Ensuring that the overarching project is well defined and then split into simple work packages, rather than developing many (in the case of Habitat Cheltenham: 31) mini projects that then need to be coerced into one larger umbrella project.

2. **Contingency planning** - Ensuring that interventions are adequately designed to mitigate theft (by humans and squirrels!), purposeful or accidental damage by homeless sleepers, night-time revellers, dogs, and children/students playing, as well as periods of drought or excessive rain.

3. **Ring-fencing specific funds for delivery** - Ensuring funds are moved under a dedicated project cost code from project outset to ensure they can't be used by other departments/projects resulting in the project team spending time reidentifying funds each quarter.

4. **Appoint a fund knowledgeable project manager** - Appointing a project manager with relevant funding experience, rather than subject specialisms, to ensure fund, contract and reporting requirements are understood and appropriate, streamlined project processes are implemented from the project outset, and then maintained throughout the project lifespan.

5. **Documented handovers** - Ensuring a clear, and documented handover, from those writing the full application to those delivering the project in the first instance. Then ensuring any handovers between project managers are, ideally carried out in person but are also, documented.

6. **More consistent use of a decisions log** - Ensuring all decisions are documented when they are made to ensure any new project managers have a clear overview of the project to date.

7. **Replacing resource** - Ensuring that, as and when staff leave the project, that they are replaced or their work adequately understood and taken on by someone else in the team.

8. **Less ERDF paperwork** - The Habitat Cheltenham project team stated that the ERDF processes set out by the managing authority were often confusing, ever-changing, and sometimes unmanageable, particularly for a small council, taking much time away from on-site delivery.

3.3 BENEFICIARIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

The intervention logic for this project is that habitat rehabilitation drives improvements in conservation status, which in turn benefits the local and visitor economies and inward investment. The end beneficiaries are indirect and no wide-ranging beneficiary data was collected for this summative assessment.

SECTION 4: PROJECT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

4.1 DIRECT PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS

The Habitat Cheltenham project has delivered as outlined in table 4 (below) against the intended outcomes, as set out in the logic model.

Table 4: Progress against intended project outcomes

Outcome	Measurement	Achieved	Direct / Indirect	Evidence
Creation of new and enhancement of existing green infrastructure, creating new habitat to support biodiversity	Numbers of solitary bees and invertebrates	Yes - 2.113ha	Direct	The measurement outlined in the logic model relates to the original understanding of the C23 output - at project closure, and following changes outlined in PCR 3, this measurement is no longer considered appropriate for this project. Instead, CBC can evidence that, through the Habitat Cheltenham project, they have enhanced 2.113ha of land, creating or improving habitat to support biodiversity. They have site, intervention, and planting plans as well as before and after pictures depicting the activities undertaken.

The Habitat Cheltenham project has delivered, as outlined in table 5 (below), against intended impacts, as set out in the logic model.

Table 5: Progress against intended project impact

Outcome	Measurement	Achieved	Direct / Indirect	Evidence
Creation of a habitat network providing a cross-town link between the surrounding green spaces.	Delivery of relevant interventions	Yes	Direct	Before and after photos and site visits confirm the implementation of interventions at a mosaic of sites covering the central areas of Cheltenham and offering a network to link surrounding green spaces. In addition, Roger Mortlock (CEO, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust) noted that the project has addressed an important biodiversity challenge that is often overlooked in very urban habitats; the project has linked pockets of habitat together creating a corridor ensuring species can move across the town centre.
A more biodiverse town centre.	Delivery of relevant interventions	Yes	Direct	Before and after photos and site visits confirm the implementation of interventions to create habitats for biodiversity covering the central areas of Cheltenham. In addition, Roger Mortlock (CEO, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust) noted that the project has addressed an important biodiversity challenge that is often overlooked in very urban habitats; the project has linked pockets of habitat together creating a corridor ensuring species can move across the town centre.
Better flood resilience in the central area.	Delivery of relevant interventions	n/a	Direct	Albeit that tree planting and soft landscaping are known to support flood resilience, following PCR 3, specific flood defence activities (raingardens and green wall features) were removed from the project scope.
Improved air quality.	Air quality tests	TBC	Direct	Interventions have not been in place for sufficient time to enable robust measurement of air quality improvements.
A more attractive environment for a highly skilled workforce,	Wellbeing surveys of residents/town centre users	TBC	Indirect	Site interventions have not been in place for sufficient time to enable robust measurement of wellbeing impacts. However, it is worth noting that the Winston Churchill Memorial Gardens received a Green Flag Award® 2022/23 recognising it as a well-managed park or

inward investment, and a tourism/visitor economy destination.				green space, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world. https://www.greenflagaward.org/park-summary/?park=3350 In addition, Minster Gardens provides the first step in the regeneration of the entire heart of Cheltenham - a scheme designed to re-invigorate the economy. Minster Gardens sits between the commercial high street and new, innovative MX building which will provide space to foster development of start-up cyber businesses bringing jobs and economic growth. The MX will contain an event space which will be programmed by Cheltenham Festivals and aims to add another flagship cultural venue to the town centre. Even though the MX building is not yet open, improvements to the gardens have already increased footfall, with more dwell time for lunch breaks and contemplation. Finally, the project team stated the CBC are receiving more positive feedback (verbal, emailed and letters - examples below) about the areas that are part of the Habitat Cheltenham project… [redacted] Dear Adam, Since most people are more than willing to write emails when they are not happy or have something to grumble about, including me, I thought an email praising the Green Space and Townscape teams was more than overdue. Chris Veal and I stood and looked across the WCMG during last Thursday's working party and remarked how we had never felt more optimistic about the future. The recent level of investment in the park has been simply magnificent - thank you. As we looked at the Green Flag fluttering on its new flag pole, the new railings around the central beds that - though fairly bare due to the time of year - looked at last as if progress was being made and the new planting along the high street and in front of the Mission, one couldn't help but feel a real sense of things really looking up for the WCMG. Of course we want more but know that things are being planned, more especially the removing and re-purposing of the railings around the Mission building and a rethink on the planting of the central beds. As you know I personally have never been happy about the original planting of the central beds. I understood fully the logic of the planting in terms of the ecology and the fact that to some extent the planting was an experiment, but the very ad-hoc planting scheme was always going to cause difficult maintenance issues with a 'voluntary army' looking after it. I appreciate the intervention of Covid-19 was also a factor. But to know the Green Space Team are now considering replanting them using the 'block planting' concept is welcomed by all. During our brief chat with Malcolm, yesterday, it was suggested that maybe we could offer a student prize for the best new planting scheme to a student at either Pershore or Gloucester College. This could be perhaps via contributions from our Friends Group and CBC. I would be willing personally to add to the prize money since I think it should be at least £500. However, your team along with Marta and her Townscape team have done a great job on the High street entrance and the Mission so perhaps the solution can best be handled in house. I think it would be nice to incorporate some winter interest into the replanting of these central beds such as "Winter Fire" Cornus perhaps underplanted with hardy cyclamen, aconites or snowdrops. They could also do with a bit of height similar to the Amelanchier trees dotted along the new High street entrance planting. I also detected some reservations by some about the railings being fitted between the brick piers along the pergola. Do you think it might be worth placing or wedging one section of railings between one set of brick piers to just get a feel of the finished effect before it becomes permanent? Just a thought. Finally, returning to the main reason for this email. Thank you to yourself, Malcolm, Marta, Lucy, Steve and Colin for working with us to make the WCMG a much improved community space. On a day to day basis I think you already know the great difference Lucy has made to the organisation of our working parties. Also please pass our grateful thanks to Andy, Carol and everyone at Ubico for their continued support on our working party days. I think I speak for all our Friends' Group when I say we cannot wait for late spring and early summer when all the work this winter starts to come to fruition. With very best wishes, Peter [redacted] To All Staff. I just wanted to say how lovely the replanted two flower beds outside John Lewis's look. It was a shame after a week of planting someone had taken two of the shrubs in the right hand flower bed. What an added bonus the bright coloured daffodils are now looking. Well Done to You All. Denise [redacted]

A more attractive place for walking and cycling	Wellbeing surveys of residents/town centre users	TBC	Indirect	Site interventions have not been in place for sufficient time to enable robust measurement of wellbeing impacts. However, the project has considered how to address this outcome; there is more attractive planting along Chelt Walk, a favourite with walkers and cyclers, and bollards have been introduced at Minster Garden to prevent vehicle access and make it safer for pedestrians and cyclists.

4.3 ERDF PROGRAMME ACHIEVEMENTS

The Habitat Cheltenham project has contributed to the achievement of the following ERDF programme result indicators, as defined in ESIF-GN-002 ERDF Output Indicators Guidance, version 9:

- **C23: Hectares of habitats with improved conservation status** = 2.113 hectares

4.4 ADDED STRATEGIC VALUE

The GFirst Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) sets out an ambition to "*capitalise on Gloucestershire's natural assets and rural environment to make the county the greenest place to live and work in England*" and an aspiration to "*protect, restore and promote our green assets and natural environment*". It is considered that the Habitat Cheltenham project supports this ambition and aspiration in the following ways:

1. **Supporting existing and developing new plans and policies** - Tracey Birkinshaw (Director of Community and Economic Development) and Adam Reynolds (CBC Green Space Manager) agree that the Habitat Cheltenham project has been a catalyst and test bed for activities now contained within future, five-year strategic plans relating to climate change mitigation, achieving carbon net zero targets, and addressing the biodiversity crisis. Adam Reynolds (Green Space Manager) noted that, in particular, the No Mow May initiative is now an annual activity, CBC are replacing annual bedding plants with drought resistant perennials, and establishing meadows, and activities to create species rich habitats on the town's roundabouts are being rolled out to other locations.

2. **A 'green and verdant' town** - In 2016, there were no more than ten street trees left within the central town area, this was considered to contradict Cheltenham's reputation as a 'green and verdant' town; a more biodiverse town centre needed creating. In 2023, Tracey Birkinshaw, Director Community and Economic Development, confirmed that Cheltenham has become known by the strapline "a town within a park" and as a green place to live and work; this has been aided by the highly visual ERDF interventions, particularly Montpelier Roundabout and the High Street outside the new John Lewis department store, as well as the planting of 26 new trees.

SECTION 5: PROJECT VALUE FOR MONEY

5.1 COST PER OUTPUT ANALYSIS

With most habitat enhancement activity, there is inevitably a lag between the time of project delivery and when positive economic results, local prosperity, and/or Gross Value Added (GVA) can be successfully measured. Even then, given the reference period for implementation being 15 years, it would be difficult to successfully attribute results directly to the Habitat Cheltenham ERDF project.

Given the large variations in project locations, ambitions, and activities, it is also not deemed appropriate to carry out value for money comparisons between different ERDF PA6 projects.

In place of a review looking at additional turnover, GVA, or project to project comparisons in more detail, a crude cost per output analysis, like that carried out by the managing authority as part of initial project selection, has been undertaken and is presented in the table 6, overleaf.

Table 6: Cost per Output Analysis

Output	Total hectares	Cost per hectare, based on total project cost: £903,677.80	Cost per hectare based on ERDF intervention: £451,838.90
C23: Surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status	2.113	£427,675.25	£213,837.62

At appointment of contract the managing authority and GFirst considered that the project offered satisfactory value for money in terms of number of outputs being delivered for the total project cost and level of ERDF intervention.

Considering the clarified outputs (removal of C22 and change to C23) and the 29% decrease in overall project expenditure and similar 30% decrease in site-specific habitat enhancement activity, it could be concluded that the project continues to offer the same value for money at project closure as when contracted.

SECTION 6: CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

6.1 PROJECT STRENGTHS

The following are the Habitat Cheltenham projects main strengths and achievements:

- The project activities have been delivered as per the funding agreement.
- Over two hectares of biodiversity rich habitat have been created in a very dense urban landscape.
- Sophie Barton, Marta Cowling, and Jackie Jobes carefully navigated the difficulties of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring the project remained deliverable. Sophie Barton has been described as “taking the bull by the horns” and is credited with ensuring all outstanding targets were met within the final year of the project.
- There was good knowledge transfer between two Gloucestershire ERDF PA6 projects; the Habitat Cheltenham team and Gloucester Urban Greening Project team shared ongoing lesson learning about implementing green infrastructure in urban environments. More about the Gloucester Urban Greening Project can be viewed here: https://www.gloucester.gov.uk/environment-waste-recycling/nature-and-conservation/gloucester-urban-greening-project/.
- The project provided c30 volunteering opportunities.
- The Winston Churchill Memorial Gardens received a Green Flag Award® 2022/23 recognising it as a well-managed park or green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world https://www.greenflagaward.org/park-summary/?park=3350.
- Interventions have had positive feedback from residents; particularly in relation to the enhancements at the Montpelier Roundabout, which is considered a pivotal entry point to the town centre. Adam Reynolds (CBC Green Space Manager) noted that, following some initial concerns and objections about moving away from a ‘Royal Parks’ look and feel, CBC has received lots of compliments about the works completed.
- Roger Mortlock (CEO, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust) noted that the project has addressed an important biodiversity challenge that is often overlooked in very urban habitats; the project has linked pockets of habitat together creating a corridor ensuring species, particularly pollinators, can move across the town centre.

6.2 PROJECT WEAKNESSES

The following are the Habitat Cheltenham projects main weaknesses:

- Over developing the initial project scope, trying to make the most of potential funds available, meant the initial project consisted of 31 complicated mini projects, each with their own scope and budget details. The project was much easier to manage once project activities had been consolidated into 14 comprehensive work packages and the focus was on delivery of activities to satisfy (revised) C23 outputs.

- In initial project design, not more carefully considering which interventions should be implemented at which location. E.g., the beehives ended up out of scope for budget reasons, but they may not have been introduced anyway because of objections submitted as part of the planning consultation process for Minster Gardens (i.e., "*The desire to introduce biodiversity seems to have magically usurped this requirement* [for practical seating areas]. *Who wants bees and wasps buzzing around their heads when having a sandwich, lunch, or coffee, especially children?*". In hindsight, the project team think there were other, more open, and less frequented, areas that would have been better suited to beehives and caused less cause for concern from the public.

- Not having a project manager with ERDF-specific knowledge coupled with no consistency in the contract manager available at the managing authority meant a lot of time was spent trying to understand fund rules and requirements and gauge compliance of activities.

- The project team felt that, had Brexit and Covid-19 not resulted in such huge cost increases for building and construction materials, the project could have offered better value for money.

6.3 LESSONS LEARNT

Lessons learnt for the grant recipient / project delivery body:

- The project team and project sponsor felt the main lesson learnt was to **think very carefully before applying for any similar funding** in future; all potential risks need identifying and mitigating before an application is submitted.

- As a "small Council with big ambitions", Tracey Birkinshaw (Director of Community and Economic Development) suggested that any **future funding applications should be for support or enhancement of existing ambitions,** schemes, or initiatives rather than require an entirely new project to be developed.

- The project team noted that for any future projects it would be pertinent to **recruit a project manager with relevant funding experience**, rather than subject specialisms.

- The project team highlighted that, for future projects, there needs to be a **different approach to project management**. The project manager should maintain a log or set of file notes detailing project progress and activities which can form the basis for a handover pack, if needed. CBC have already started using an online project management software package to address this lesson.

- Adam Reynolds (CBC Green Space Manager) and Marta Cowling (Urban Designer and Landscape Architect) agree that any future, large scale green space projects should **make better use of volunteers and community interest groups** to support delivery - not only does it mean more can be spent on capital expenditure, as there is a cost saving on internal resource, there is real added value in local people taking ownership and responsibility for, and pride in, habitat enhancement for the benefit of wildlife, other residents, and visitors.

Lessons learnt for policy makers / funders:

- There should be **longer application windows than six weeks** - for a small Council with limited resource, six weeks to develop a project outline, identify match funding, and go through sign-off is too short.

- Where so much resource and time is required to develop an application, **funding needs to be less competitive**. Tracey Birkinshaw (Director of Community and Economic Development) suggested this could be as simple as better clarifying and narrowing call scope so that it is clearer to potential applicants their chance of being successful.

- The project team suggested that there should be **one clear point of contact at the managing authority** who is **able to provide clear and specific support, advice, and guidance** to grant recipients to maintain confidence, ensure compliance, and to help with form filling.

- The project team suggested that **the managing authority contract managers should take greater responsibility for ensuring fund** requirements are understood, particularly in terms of documentation and evidence, when there are changes in project managers. This should include the managing authority taking responsibility for signing up new contacts to the informative/top tips newsletter emails.

- The **fund website needs to be easier to navigate,** potentially **with a clear flow chart** detailing the processes, and associated forms, from call publication and initial outline application through to final claim submission and summative assessments.

- **Fund guidelines should be more user-friendly, published in a timelier fashion, amendments easier to identify and address,** and ultimately support **solution resolution.**

- There should be **better flexibility in finding solutions to challenges,** e.g., CBC could have offered greater outputs and better value for money should they have been able to complete a green roof scheme, in place of the green wall scheme. However, even though supporting C23 outputs, this change was deemed ineligible by the managing authority as the spaces themselves would not be made publicly accessible and were also the roof space of a hospitality organisation.

- The project team suggested that the amount of **form filling should be reduced** to enable better use of time to deliver on-site project activities.

6.4 CONCLUSIONS

While there were challenges highlighted relating to project management and the impacts of both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, overall, the project has delivered well:

- The project delivered all intended (adjusted) activities:
  - Introducing varied mowing regimes, with plug planting and seeding of flowers
  - Introducing selective tree and shrub management - creating areas of shade and sunlit glade
  - Constructing hibernacula, including some measures incorporated into features e.g., benches
  - Tree planting, particularly in and around car parks
  - Introducing grass and herbaceous margins alongside carriageways and footpaths

- The project spent to the (adjusted) expenditure target.

- The project delivered to (adjusted) output targets; 2.113 hectares of surface area of habitats supported to attain better conservation status have been delivered.

- The project offers added strategic value by delivering against Local Industrial Strategy objectives.

- Project outputs offer similar value for money at project closure as at contract.

- The project has been well received by residents.

- The project has been a catalyst for improving internal systems at CBC and for developing future plans, and strategies for addressing the climate change emergency and biodiversity crisis.