



European Union

European Regional
Development Fund

OPEN-LEA (DE-CULVERTING RIVER LEA IN LUTON)

Final Summative Assessment Report from PFA Research Ltd

January 2023

Authors:

Katherine Stewart, Researcher | katherine.stewart@pfa-research.com

Robert Rush, Managing Director | robert.rush@pfa-research.com

pfa-research.com

Ref. JN1329



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1 Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

The Open-Lea (De-culverting River Lea in Luton) project involves de-culverting part of the River Lea, creating a park with biodiversity gains in the centre of Luton (opening up a covered river). The activities undertaken as part of the project are:

- Removal of culvert (~30m over ~45m of river)
- Opening of river and generating ecological benefits through daylighting
- Creating new banks (part stepped) to the river to enable public access
- Decontaminating former industrial hat factory site
- Creating areas for green infrastructure benefits on former contaminated land (ecological and environmental)

It is hoped that the removal of the culvert and earth works improve flood resilience of the area by providing additional flood storage. A new public open space will be created within the centre of Luton (where green space is extremely limited). The capital investment is £1,916,403, which is made up of 50% ERDF funding and 50% Luton Borough Council funding.

The contracted outputs for the project are:

Indicator		Target
C22	Surface area of rehabilitated land	0.161 ha
C23	Surface area of habitats	0.08 ha

PFA Research, an independent research company, was appointed to undertake a final summative assessment through the collation of data and compilation of the summative assessment report.

The objectives of this summative assessment are:

- Report on achievement of the project's outputs
- Assess achievement of the project's impacts
- Undertake an independent assessment and analysis of the project context and objectives, project progress, project delivery and management and value for money
- Investigate stakeholder confidence and awareness and assess the strategic added value created through the project
- Collate and summarise lessons learned and best practice for future projects

1.2 Brief methodology statement

The research methodology for the interim summative assessment comprised:

- Background review and desk analysis
- Interviews with the delivery team and stakeholders
- Interviews/survey with the wider community in Luton
- Analysis of data collected and delivery of findings through a written report

1.3 Findings

The key findings from the report have been summarised below.

1.3.1 Community Interview/Survey Results

Participants were asked whether they were familiar with the project site and the vast majority (86%) said they were. Of these, almost two thirds (63%) said they were familiar with the project works taking place to de-culvert the River Lea. Of all respondents, over a third could recall seeing or hearing something in the news or media about the Open Lea Project.

The majority of community survey respondents (70%) believe that there will be benefits from the project. 19% think the works will make the area more attractive and nicer to look at, and 19% welcome the opportunity to have more open and green spaces. 13% think it will benefit children and people in the area, to give them somewhere to spend time. However, 23% were unable to say (by not knowing enough about it) and 7% are unconvinced that it will be a benefit at all, with some of those believing the new open space will create social problems.

Of those aware of the Open Lea Project, the majority of residents agree that the project will:

- improve the area - 75% agree
- encourage people into the town centre – 60% agree
- encourage people to spend more time in the town centre – 67% agree

Further, 71% are looking forward to visiting and spending time at the new open space created by the project. Only 34% 'agree' that the project works have been disruptive.

Of those aware of the Open Lea Project, the majority of residents agree that the project will:

- improve biodiversity and the environment - 73% agree
- provide health and wellbeing benefits to local people – 73% agree
- encourage investment and town centre regeneration – 70% agree

Additionally, 80% agree that it is important for Luton Borough Council to support and invest in schemes like the Open Lea Project.

1.3.2 Context and relevance

Having reviewed the project ERDF application form and more recently published policy documents, it is believed that the Open-Lea project is contributing to the following policy and strategy areas:

- Luton Town Centre Masterplan Framework
- Luton Local Plan 2011 - 2031
- A Green Infrastructure Plan for Luton¹ and Greenspace Strategy Review
- South East Midlands LEP (SEMLEP) Strategic Economic Plan

¹<https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Local%20Plan/Natural%20and%20historic%20environment/ENV%20006.pdf>

All of the delivery team and stakeholder interviewees agreed that the project is still relevant and delivers an important service, with several people citing the wider masterplan for the town. Two stakeholders felt that the project was important due to its ability to connect people to nature. And a further two talked about the importance of uncovering and celebrating the river.

In terms of whether anything has changed in terms of the background and context during the delivery of the project, most of the delivery team felt that not much had changed. Covid and Brexit were mentioned as impacts and the stakeholders talked about how Covid had increased the need for green space and changed the way that people use the town centre.

1.3.3 Project delivery and management

The delivery team all thought that the project was being well-managed but most of the stakeholders felt unable to comment but one person said: *"From what I've seen, it seems to be. It looked very organised and it seemed to be being delivered as expected so...it looked pretty good to me."*




1.3.4 Project progress and achievements

The table below presents an assessment of the project spend against target with 'traffic lighting' RAG² assessment. The capital expenditure has achieved 54% of the target as of September 2022 and is currently given a red status. The delivery team report that there may be an underspend at the end of the project but there could be some few additional works to be completed to protect the planted areas of the park. The revenue spend has been given amber status as it is 91.3% spent at this stage.

The C22 output (surface area of rehabilitated land) has been fully achieved and independently verified through a professionally procured topographical survey in coordination with the Ground Engineer. The C23 output (surface area of habitats) has also been fully achieved and independently verified through a professionally procured topographical survey in coordination with the Ecologist.

Table 1.1 - Performance to date (as of September 2022)

Indicator	Target	Spend/Output Achieved	% of target met (& Overall RAG Assessment ⁹)
Total ERDF Capital Expenditure	£908,574	£492,357.10	54.1%
Total ERDF Revenue Expenditure	£49,627	£45,331.59	91.3%
C22: Surface area of rehabilitated land	0.161 ha	0.161 ha	100%
C23: Surface area of habitats	0.08 ha	0.08 ha	100%

Key	
	less than 85%
	between 85% and 95%
	Greater than 95%

The delivery team all agreed that progress has been good, but there have been some delays and a delivery team interviewee explained that they started a bit later than planned. The

² RAG (Red-Amber-Green) ratings, also known as 'traffic lighting,' are used to summarise progress or indicator values, where green denotes a 'complete' or 'exceeded' position, red an 'unfavourable' or 'failing' position and amber a 'neutral' or 'nearly' position.

stakeholders were all satisfied with progress and one stakeholder felt that the project has achieved more than expected: *“Yes, the progress has been really good. It has achieved what we expected and probably over and above. It’s better than I anticipated. It was all totally rebuilt and sympathetically done and it just looked so nice. I think actually having it as a tiered thing makes better use on the space. It shows what you can do with a bit of imagination in a small space.”*

1.3.5 Outcomes and Impacts

The following table summarises the outcomes and impacts from the logic chain and comments on the progress towards achieving them. Anecdotal evidence from the community, stakeholder and delivery team surveys shows that the Luton Lea project is making some progress towards all of the outcomes and impacts on the logic chain, but it is still too early to make definitive assertions about achievement.

Table 1.2 – Summary: Logic Chain Outcomes and Impacts

	Indicator	Comment
Outcomes	Improved flooding capacity	Interviewee states that this is in place (see p 29)
	Enhanced ecological value and linking wildlife corridor	Interviewee states that this is in place but may take time to develop (see p 29)
	Retention and attraction of business	Interviewees state that this may happen in the near future (see p 29)
	Health and wellbeing benefits	Interviewee states that this may happen in the future, but may take a while for benefits to accrue (see p 29)
Impacts	Biodiversity gains	Interviewee states that this may take time for benefits to accrue (see p 29). The Ecological Impact assessment stated that there will be biodiversity gains (see p 33)
	Improved environment to support wider town centre regeneration	All interviewees agree that this project has an improved environment that is the first step in the Luton masterplan (see p 29)
	Less flooding impact	Interviewee states that this is in place (see p 29)
	Health and wellbeing impact	Interviewee states that this may happen in the future, but may take a while for benefits to accrue (see p 29)

When asked about what progress has been made in achieving the outcomes and impacts, the delivery team were all very positive. The key areas mentioned were the ecological impacts of the project, flood alleviation, the green space created and the wider impacts that might accrue over time (economic, ecological, health and well-being. The stakeholders talked about the creation of green space, the impacts for people and the benefits to local businesses.

1.3.6 Strategic Impact

When asked about whether the project has created strategic impacts, such as strategic leadership, influence and engagement, most of the stakeholders agreed that it has. The stakeholders discussed the 2040 vision for Luton, sharing best practice, collaboration and leadership. But one stakeholder felt that it was too early to say.

The delivery team and stakeholders gave feedback on what they thought the project’s legacy would be and the areas mentioned were: attracting people into the town centre, the wider vision for Luton, improving the perception of Luton town centre, space for the community, the connections made between key people and the legacy for business.

In terms of progress regarding the Horizontal Principles:

The **Environmental Sustainability Principle**: an Ecological Impact Assessment³ was undertaken and it was found that:

- The works are likely to have a significant positive effect on the River Lea by creating more wildlife-friendly habitat which will act as a stepping stone between other suitable habitat along the water course.
- The works are likely to have no significant negative effect to protected species on site and there will be no residual impacts.
- As the scheme will include planting wildlife friendly species on site, reinstatement of the chalk bed in the river and putting up bat and bird boxes, the scheme will result in a biodiversity gain.

The **Equal Opportunities and Non-discrimination Principle**: the Luton Leas site is located in a highly sustainable location for arriving by public transport and is located in a densely populated/occupied part of the town making access readily available to a large portion of the public. The location and footfall of the site makes this a very accessible site to a lot of people where there is an identified need for green and open spaces. This will have numerous health, well-being and amenity benefits.

1.3.7 Value for Money

The stakeholders were asked to comment on whether they felt the project has achieved value for money and whether they can benchmark against any other similar projects. Most of the stakeholders felt unable to comment on this, but one person gave positive feedback and another stakeholder discussed the importance of the ERDF funding.

1.3.8 Lessons Learned

Lessons learned were collected from the delivery team interviews and from the stakeholders and are presented in the report under the themes of design, delivery, administration and policy.

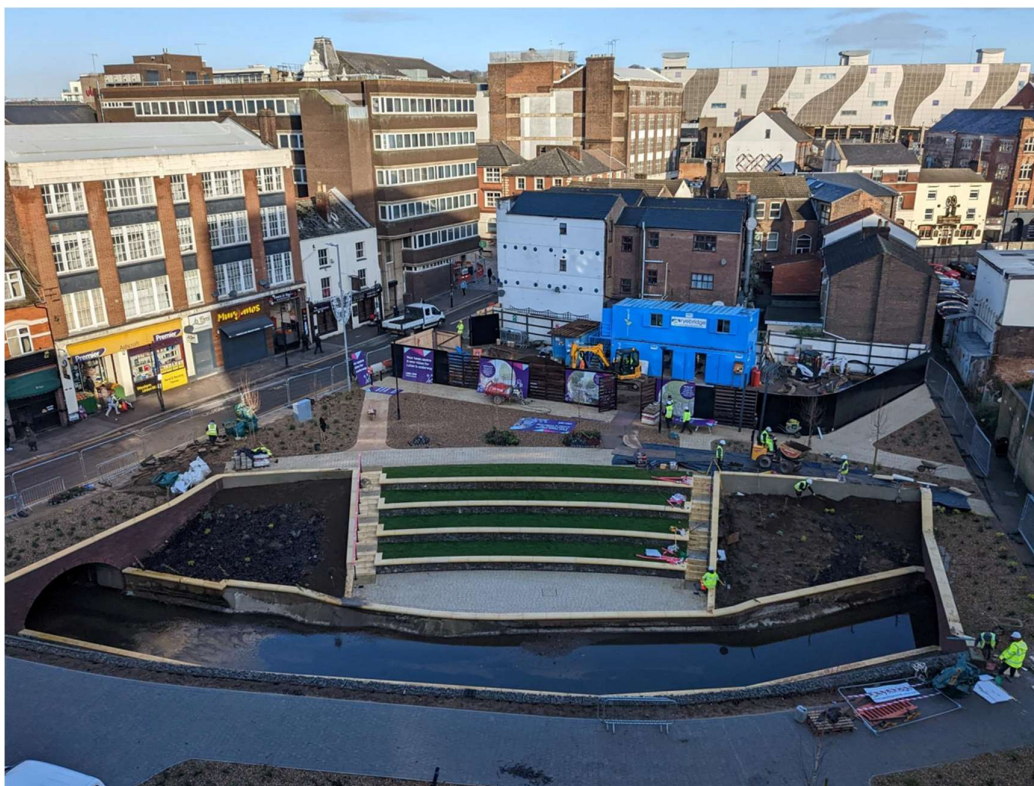
³ Ecological Impact Assessment Report, MLM Consulting Engineers Limited, February 2021 (p23)

2 Background and Context

2.1 The Open-Lea (De-culverting River Lea in Luton) project

The Open-Lea (De-culverting River Lea in Luton) project involves de-culverting part of the River Lea, creating a park with biodiversity gains in the centre of Luton (opening up a covered river). The site has limited development potential due to high levels of contamination, the culvert is at risk of collapse and the site is historically contaminated from Victorian uses. There is an increasing population of families within town centre with lack of access to green space and there is also a break in the River Lea wildlife corridor, which will be addressed through this project.

It is hoped that the removal of the culvert and earth works improve flood resilience of the area by providing additional flood storage. A new public open space will be created within the centre of Luton (where green space is extremely limited). The capital investment is £1,916,403, which is made up of 50% ERDF funding and 50% Luton Borough Council funding.



2.2 Project Aims and Objectives

The Open-Lea project was a response to ERDF Call reference OC31R19P 0974 under Priority Axis 6: Preserving and Protecting the Environment and Promoting Resource Efficiency.

The objectives of the project are to:

- Removal of culvert (~30m over ~45m of river)
- Opening of river and generating ecological benefits through daylighting
- Creating new banks (part stepped) to the river to enable public access

- Decontaminating former industrial hat factory site
- Creating areas for green infrastructure benefits on former contaminated land (ecological and environmental)

The contracted outputs for the project are:

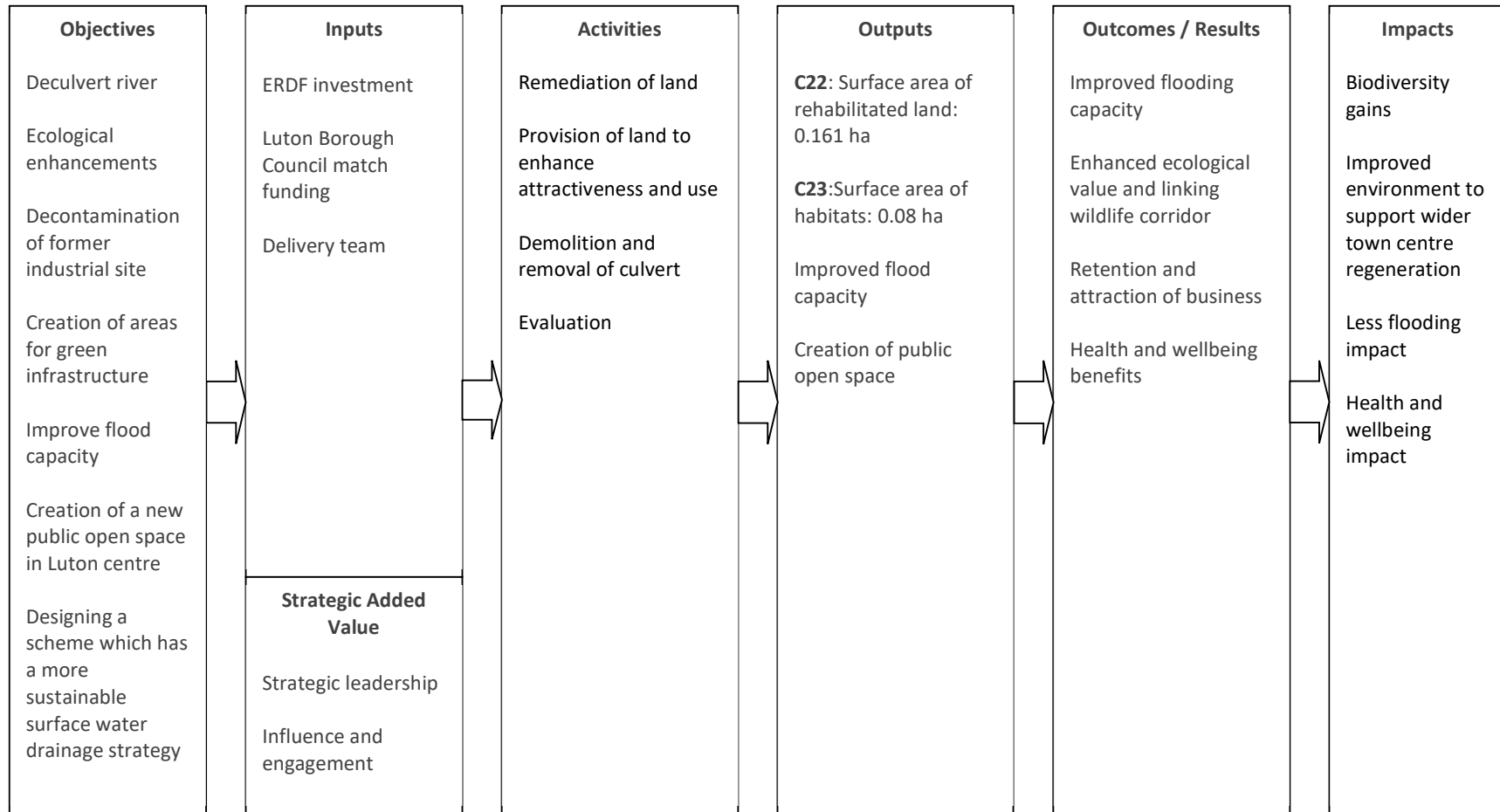
Indicator		Target
C22	Surface area of rehabilitated land	0.161 ha
C23	Surface area of habitats	0.08 ha

A **Project Change Request** was submitted to address errors that were made in the original Grant Funding Agreement regarding the outputs and the project end dates. The following changes were agreed by the Managing Authority:

- The C22 output target is now 0.161 hectares
- The C23 output target is now 0.08 hectares.
- The Activity End Date and the Financial and Practical Completion Dates are 01/04/2023

The following diagram shows the updated logic chain for use during the summative assessment.

Figure 2-1 - Logic Chain



2.3 Role of the Final Evaluation/Summative Assessment

PFA Research, an independent research company, was appointed to undertake a final summative assessment through the collation of data and compilation of the Summative Assessment report.

The objectives of this Summative Assessment are:

- Report on achievement of the project's outputs
- Undertake an independent assessment and analysis of the project context and objectives, project progress, project delivery and management and value for money
- Investigate stakeholder confidence and awareness and assess the strategic added value created through the project
- Collate and summarise lessons learned and best practice for future similar projects

2.4 Evaluation Methodology

The research methodology was made up of the following elements:

- Background review and desk analysis
- Interviews with the delivery team and stakeholders
- Interviews and survey of the local community
- Analysis of data collected and delivery of findings through a written report

Review of key documentation

This has included a review of the ERDF project application form, claim forms and progress reports and project change requests. The review has assessed the context, rationale, market failures etc of the Open Lean project. Assessment of claims from Luton Borough Council has been used to quantitatively assess the costs and timescale targets for the project.

Primary Research: Delivery Team

Telephone interviews have been undertaken with four team members. The interviews were undertaken in December 2022 and no specific quotes have been attributed to interviewees as some of them wished to remain anonymous. The interviews collected data in the following areas:

- Feedback on programme delivery and management
- Progress made and achievements
- Feedback on beneficiary engagement
- Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Lessons learned

Primary Research: Stakeholders

Seven stakeholders have been interviewed in order to capture the strategic aspects of the programme, as well as feedback on progress, delivery, management and lessons learned. No specific quotes have been attributed to interviewees as some of them wished to remain anonymous.

Primary Research: Community Survey

A survey was conducted amongst residents of Luton, using online and telephone methods. The survey collected 200 interviews, comprising 100 online survey completions and 100 via telephone interviews. The sample allows the survey to be quoted with a 6.9% margin of error at the 95% confidence level.

The survey was carried out during December 2022 and collected data on:

- Participant background
- Relationship with Luton town centre
- Awareness of the Open Lea project
- General feedback

3 Luton Community Survey Results

The results from a survey conducted amongst residents of Luton are presented in this chapter. The survey collected 200 interviews, comprising 100 online survey completions and 100 via telephone interviews. The sample allows the survey to be quoted with a 6.9% margin of error at the 95% confidence level.

3.1 Participant Background

The survey sample was targeted at those most likely to reside within a close distance of the project site. Over three quarters of respondents live in a postcode district LU1 (mainly sectors LU1 1, 2, 3 or 5) or LU2. 23% reside in LU3 or LU4. *Figure 3-1*

A wide cross section of ages were represented in the survey - *Figure 3-2*. About 60% of respondents are in work, either full-time or part-time employed, or self-employed - *Figure 3-3*.

Figure 3-1

Q. Do you live within one of the following postcodes...

Base: All respondents; n=200

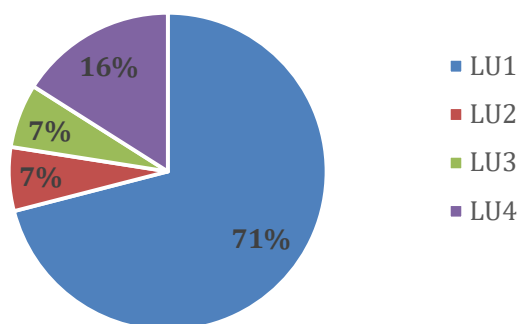


Figure 3-2

Q. What is your age?

Base: All respondents; n=200

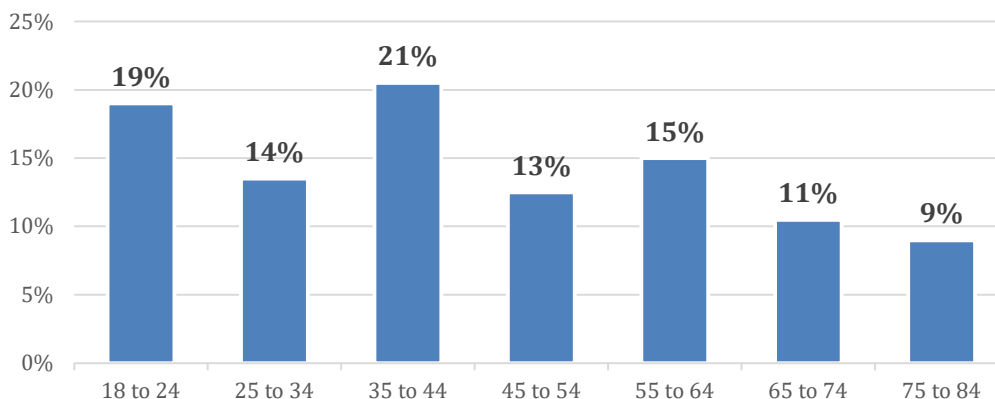
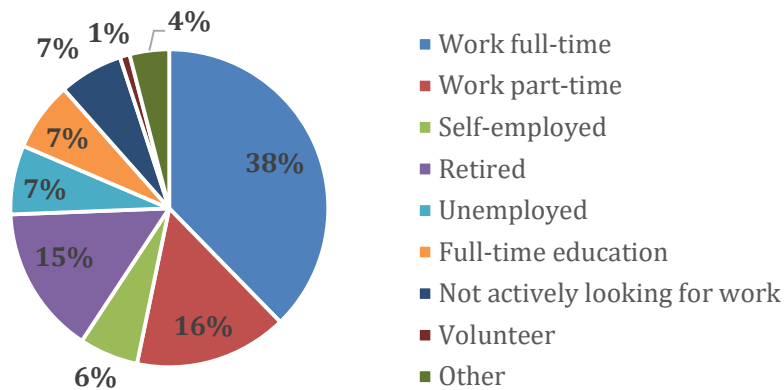


Figure 3-3

Q. What is your occupation or employment status?

Base: All respondents; n=200



3.2 Relationship with Luton Town Centre

56% of respondents say they use Luton Town Centre at least weekly (16% every day) and another quarter (26%) visit at least monthly - *Figure 3-4*. 47% of locals always or sometimes walk into the Town Centre and 51% sometimes or always drive – see *Figure 3-5*.

Nine in ten respondents visiting Luton Town Centre do so for shopping, with 35% visiting for leisure purposes (various) - *Figure 3-6*.

Figure 3-4

Q. How often do you visit or use Luton town centre, for either work or leisure?

Base: All respondents; n=200

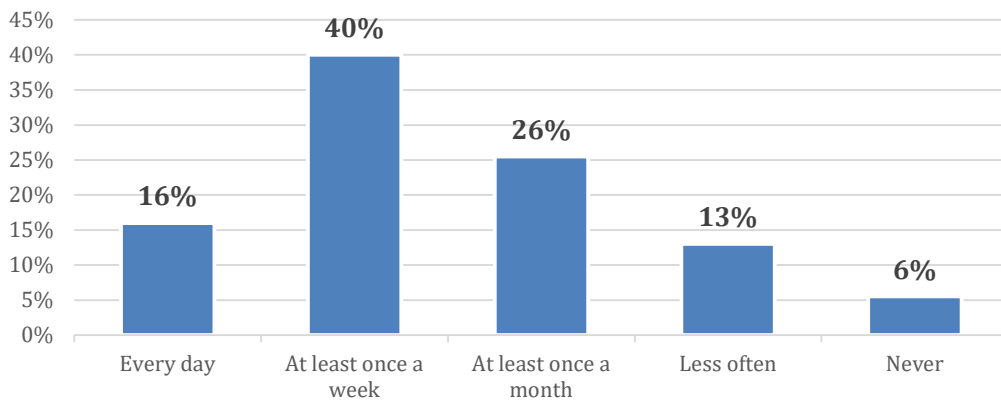


Figure 3-5

Q. How do you usually travel into Luton Town Centre?

Base: Those who visit or use Luton town centre; n=189

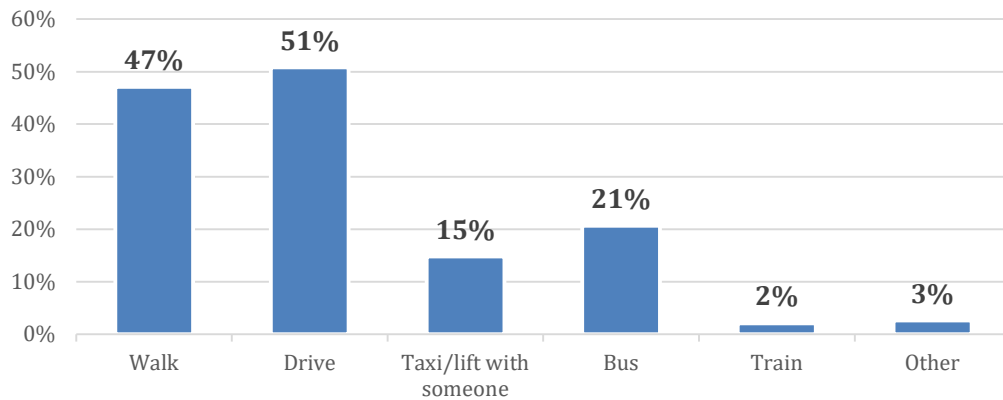
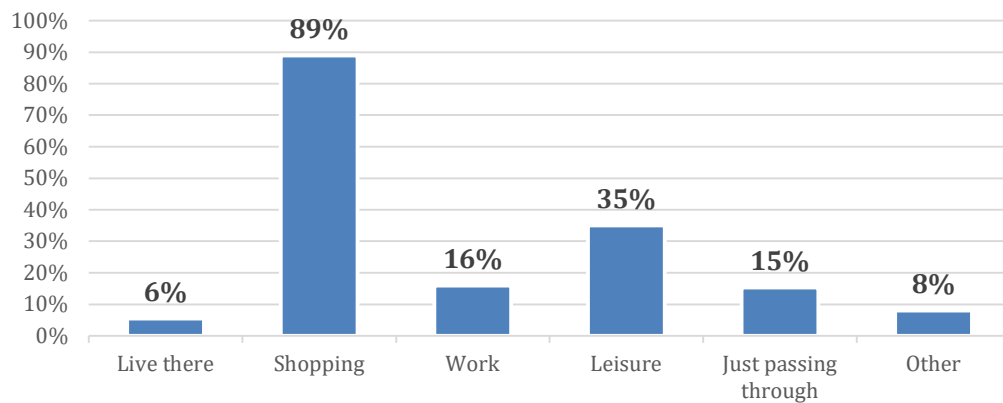


Figure 3-6

Q. For what reasons do you mostly go into Luton Town Centre?

Base: Those who visit or use Luton town centre; n=189



Other reasons include banking, medical appointments, events for children and nursery/school reasons.

3.3 Awareness of the Open Lea Project

Participants were asked whether they were familiar with the project site and the vast majority (86%) said they were - *Figure 3-7*. Of these, almost two thirds (63%) said they were familiar with the project works taking place to de-culvert the River Lea - *Figure 3-8*.

Figure 3-7

Q. Are you familiar with the area on the corner of Bute Street and Silver Street, which was once the Silver Street car park?

Base: All respondents; n=200

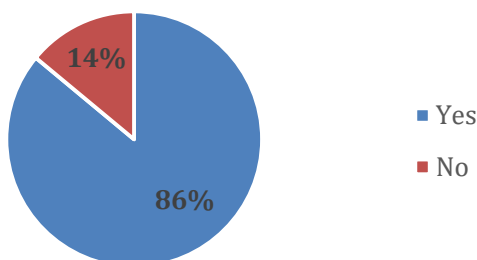
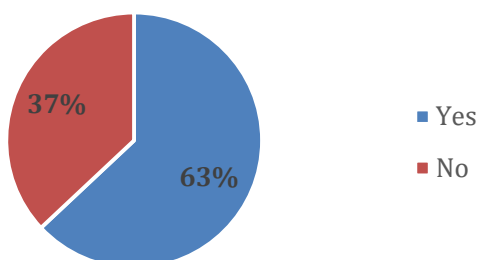


Figure 3-8

Q. Are you aware of the works that have been taking place to open up or de-culvert the River Lea that previously ran under the Silver Street Car Park, known as the Open Lea Project?

Base: Those familiar with the project site; n=171



Participants were presented or read the following explaining the Open Lea Project:

"All In 2021 the Luton Borough Council secured significant funding to open up part of the River Lea and add new green space in the middle of the town centre. The project is part Luton's 2040 vision and part of the 2021 town centre masterplan, which includes providing more open spaces for people living in the town centre, making it more child friendly and improving wellbeing.

The project works started on site in March of this year and is now almost finished."

Of all respondents, over a third could recall seeing or hearing something in the news or media about the Open Lea Project - *Figure 3-9*. For many, they have just become aware without specific recall of what or where they became aware. 14% say through 'word of mouth' and 13% have noticed the work taking place. 11% have seen artists impressions/illustrations and 11%

have seen updates or mentions through Facebook (with another 5% seeing things 'online' and 3% on Twitter).

Figure 3-9

Q. Have you seen or heard anything through the news or media about the Open Lea Project?

Base: All respondents; n=200

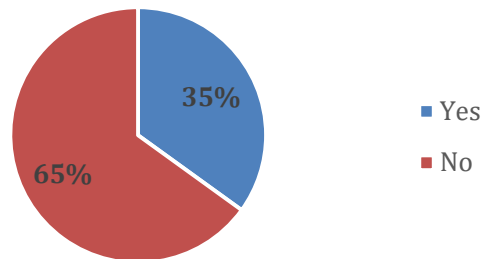
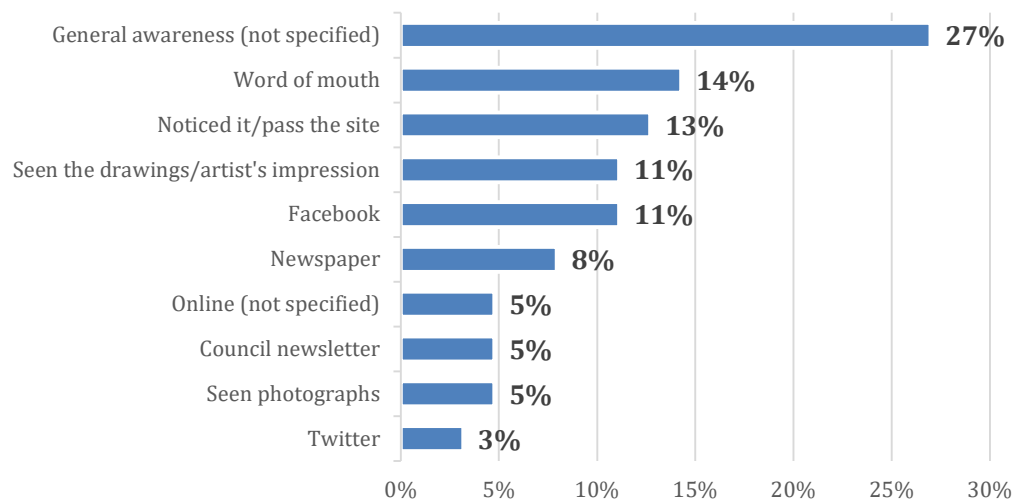


Figure 3-10

Q. What have you seen or heard about the Open Lea Project?

Base: Those who have heard/noticed news about the project, and answering; n=63



"I have seen the development taking place I pass through it regularly and have had sneak look, being in the construction industry myself."

"Saw something near Barclays bank and don't remember what I saw."

"I have been watching on the twitter feed as it is part of my job to do social media, but even if I didn't do that I'm proud of Luton, and support it; the good work people sometimes do gets overshadowed by the bad."

"I went to the wellbeing walk at the project."

"I filled in a survey a couple of years ago."

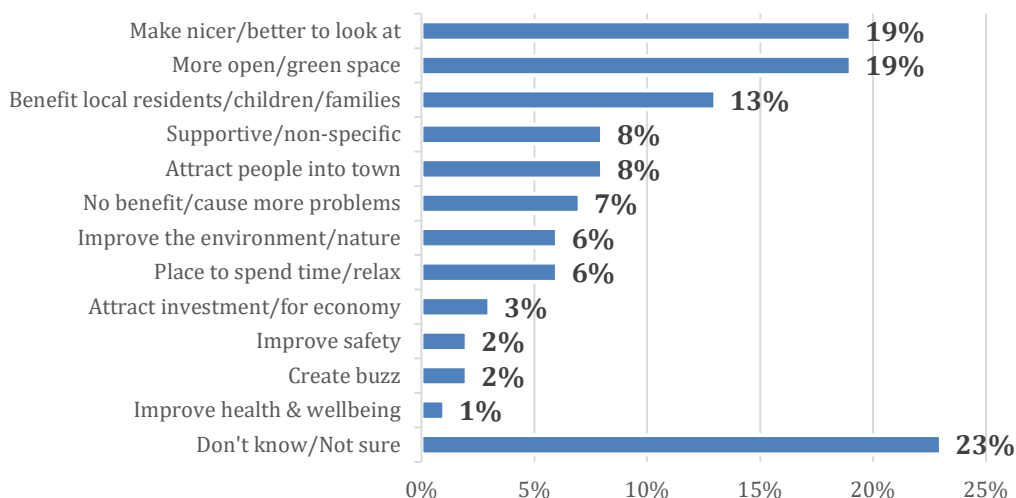
Figure 3-11 shows the views of those aware of the Open Lea Project and the ways in which they think it will be a benefit to Luton Town Centre.

The majority, 70%, believe there will be benefits. 19% think the works will make the area more attractive and nicer to look at, and 19% welcome the opportunity to have more open and green spaces. 13% think it will benefit children and people in the area, to give them somewhere to spend time. However, 23% were unable to say (by not knowing enough about it) and 7% are unconvinced that it will be a benefit at all, with some of those believing the new open space will create social problems.

Figure 3-11

Q. In what ways do you think the Open Lea Project will be a benefit to Luton Town Centre?

Base: Those with awareness of the project; n=181



"Will be a nice open space and improve the look of the entire town centre and a nice place for families and for the elderly to sit and enjoy."

"Will provide more greenery and nature."

"The space will look greener and brighter and I hope it will bring people into town for personal and social, and not just for shopping, and have more events and make the town feel more like a place to live."

"It's nice to see they're doing something with that horrible car park."

"It looks tourist attractive and it is spacious."

"I don't think there will be any just a waste of money and a danger for young children. They have opened up the river and it's tempting for young children to get close and fall in. More effort could have been put into the area around the Galaxy."

"It depends on who uses it. I'm not sure really as it could end up full of drunks."

Of those aware of the Open Lea Project, the majority of residents agree with statements presented to them that the project will:

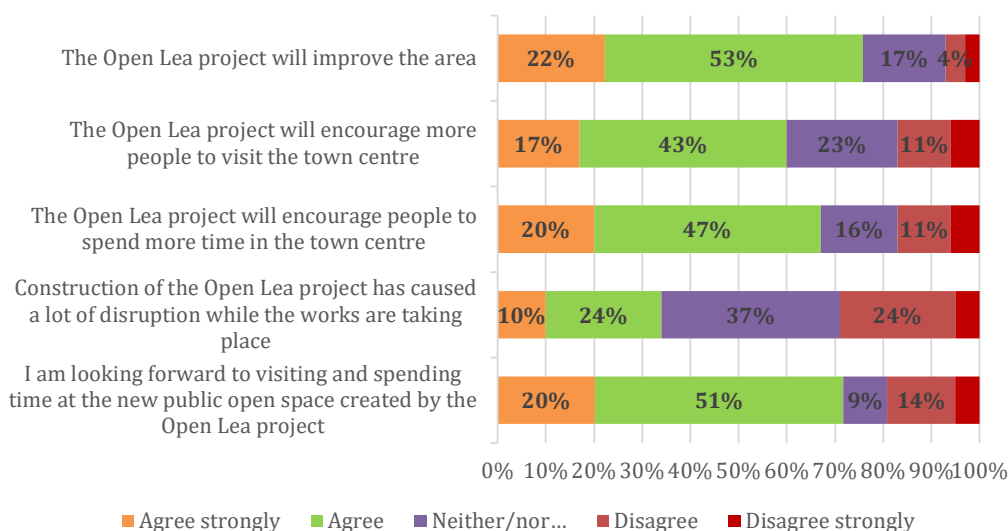
- improve the area - 75% agree
- encourage people into the town centre – 60% agree
- encourage people to spend more time in the town centre – 67% agree

Further, 71% are looking forward to visiting and spending time at the new open space created by the project. Only 34% 'agree' that the project works have been disruptive.

Figure 3-12

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...

Base: Those with awareness of the project; n=181



Of those aware of the Open Lea Project, the majority of residents agree with statements presented to them that the project will:

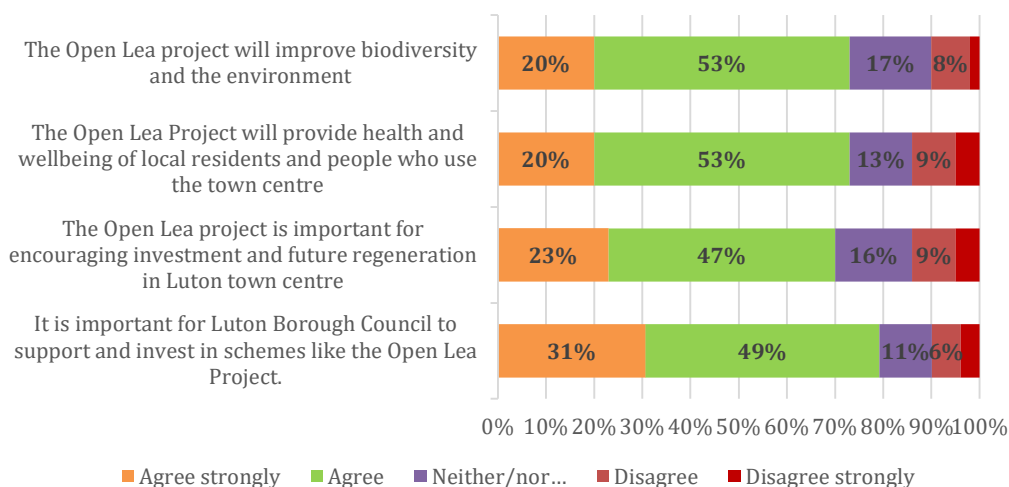
- improve biodiversity and the environment - 73% agree
- provide health and wellbeing benefits to local people – 73% agree
- encourage investment and town centre regeneration – 70% agree

Additionally, 80% agree that it is important for Luton Borough Council to support and invest in schemes like the Open Lea Project.

Figure 3-13

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements...

Base: Those with awareness of the project; n=181



3.4 Other comments

Respondents were provided the opportunity at the end of the survey to record any further comments about the project or topics raised in the survey) that they wished to be noted.

Ref	Comment
1	It's good to see that things are happening in Luton to improve facilities.
2	My only concern is could the money have been spent on something more productive. Just as with your own home and spending money on it, somethings are necessary, somethings are likes and some are luxuries. I'm worried this town centre project could be a luxury and the money could be put to better use.
3	Not specifically about that, but we need the potholes fixing.
5	I think its a fantastic idea but has come at the wrong time an the money could have been used for more children services that closed down during the pandemic and for children living in poverty.
6	You can put any projects you like in the town but there is too much crime in the centre, they have policing problems, crack heads going into shops and picking up food, we need to get these people out of this area, the crack houses and right in town so we need to get them out. We need the children to feel safe when they are in town and not bumping into someone under the influence of something.
7	The location is inconvenient and will only encourage homeless people and drug users as well as alcoholics. They need to invest more into the shops rather than pound shops as that will attract more attention and make it safer if they developed the high street.
11	They are doing very well with and the interchange of the bus station.
13	Speed up the process of construction.
16	Nothing at the moment as I haven't seen or read about it.
20	Why haven't I heard about it, or seen anything about on social media?

22	I would like cameras there so we can feel safe my age group can be safe we have youngsters with knives, and also try to keep the drunks out
24	I wish they would make something for children.
25	I think it would be nice if we had a letter from the council (a newsletter or leaflet) to keep us informed on what's going on. I didn't even know about it until this call.
27	They should do more of it, the whole town needs rejuvenating.
33	Will be able to meet friends there and have a chat, will be nice.
34	It needs to have more appealing shops for the right clientele.
38	Doing a good job.
39	Any improvement in Luton is great.
46	It would be nice to have these buildings opened up because they've been derelict.
47	I think they will need to monitor it. As the single female with children I will feel intimidated as people may use it as another gathering area. I will not go into the town centre without my husband as there are groups of males/females that shout, spit and shoplift, they drink.
48	It needs to be coordinated and needs other things done in that area and make it more enjoyable to use they need to do more than what they have done.
52	I saw no notes or survey no communication about this project going ahead, other people from the area were also unaware of this, they should have been consulted and people who live in other areas should have also been consulted. They need to tackle this unsocial behaviour, and find something for the local communities to do.
53	I am happy with that it is beneficial to us and the other people in Luton.
54	I hope it keeps looking as good as it does now but I don't think it will.
56	I'm pleased it is being done , it's a shame of the state of the rest of it, I was born here and owned businesses in Luton, but I go elsewhere for my shopping so I can feel safe , so I'm not approached by someone with a can of beer or something like that.
59	Didn't know about it but sounds like a good project that will support Luton.
62	I think it is a good idea.
65	Good that the council are investing in these sort of projects
68	No actually, it's the first time I have heard about the project, it will make the town centre look better and better environment.
69	I think the money could be spent on other things. I have lived in this town all my life and its nothing like it used to be, it's completely run down and I don't think it will benefit.
73	It hasn't been projected anywhere.
74	No thank you, it's a waste of time. There are drunks, druggies and prostitutes on every street corner, it will be ruined by them.
75	I don't think it's been publicised and other priorities that should of been sorted first.
76	Waste of money. Should have put a new carpark. Children will be walking in the river and be a danger. Will be a nightmare due to the rats.
77	Happy that they are doing it.
78	It's good for elderly people to have somewhere to go and have a seat.

79	It's disappointing that they're spending money on this when they mainly need to attract people into the centre to begin with. Spend money on facilities for all ages, ice skating, shops, attractions etc.
80	They need to advertise this a lot more as I never knew this was happening.
81	I hope people really do benefit from this.
84	Its fantastic for the area, that we are enhancing the local area, and it will help people access open green spaces which will make them feel happier.
85	I'm quite looking forward to it.
87	When I saw it for the first time it made me happier so it will be good for wellbeing.
90	I'm on the fence about it. Will have to see it myself.
91	The needs of the people are changing, it's more of a food outlet, there are no normal retail shops there anymore. The concept has changed, 50% of the cars there are to travel to other places.
92	Everything is good but should be more for deaf people. There is nothing in Luton for deaf people.
94	Full time studying and part time work. I haven't seen it, I just saw the construction, I like the idea. We need more of these projects.
95	Has benefit to some people and not others and too much congestion
97	They are making a project for the town centre but money should be spent on the surrounding areas of Luton.
99	It's a shame there isn't more knowledge out there.
100	The council should firstly take care of the un-swept streets, potholes and damaged pavements before spending money that it doesn't have on things that benefit no-one. It should look at the up-keep in other places apart from the dirty derelict town centre
103	I feel it will need to be regularly cleaned, etc.
120	It will be good to socialize with people.
136	Safety needs to be improved in the town centre to make it more attractive to visit.
138	Hope the work goes well.
161	I think they should keep up with the good work.
162	Hopefully something will be done about begging and drinking as this area will definitely attract these people and in turn will make it a less attractive place for people to visit.
170	Just that I love it I hope that it won't be an expensive area though.
173	Looking forward to the finished project.
179	I believe the construction of this area will look beautiful, but it will be ruined by all the alcoholics and drug users who loiter around the town. So really, it would be a waste of time doing it unless we are going to get police to be on hand round that area to stop all the undesirables, making it the new drink in spot.
189	We need more accommodation especially for single parent.

4 Summative Assessment Findings

The summative assessment findings incorporate the background document review, feedback from the delivery team, stakeholders and the community. The findings are set out to cover the key areas required by ERDF when undertaking a summative assessment.

4.1 Context and relevance

Having reviewed the project ERDF application form and more recently analysed published policy documents, it is believed that the Open Lea project is contributing to the following policy and strategy areas:

- **Luton Town Centre Masterplan Framework**⁴ (p3): *“Some exciting projects such as the opening up of the river Lea, work to Bute Street, public art works, heritage trail, and creating cleaner and greener streets. There will be more improved public spaces with leisure and culture and the further opening and development of the River Lea.”*
- **Luton Local Plan 2011 - 2031**⁵ (p17): *“The town's green spaces and green infrastructure network, including the River Lea and other open areas, need to be protected and enhanced for wildlife and accessibility for formal and informal recreation that bring important benefits in terms of health and wellbeing. In particular, access to greenspace networks that link up with cross boundary provision will be encouraged”*.
- **A Green Infrastructure Plan for Luton**⁶ and **Greenspace Strategy Review**⁷
- **South East Midlands LEP (SEMLEP) Strategic Economic Plan**⁸ (p19): *“Growing Places: this is about investing in and ensuring the provision of physical capital. For SEMLEP and its partners, this is about providing transport links, housing, and energy, digital, green and social infrastructure”*.

4.1.1 Delivery Team and Stakeholder Feedback on the Context and Relevance of the project

Do you think that the Open Lea project is still relevant and delivers an important service?

Has anything changed in terms of the background and context during the delivery of the project?

As part of the summative assessment research, participants (delivery team and stakeholders) were asked whether the Open Lea is still relevant and delivers an important service. All of the delivery team interviewees agreed that the project is still relevant and delivers an important service, with several people citing the **wider masterplan for the town**: *“It's part of a wider masterplan and this is the first project of that long-term masterplan. It's fab, it opens up the space, hopefully people will be proud of it, it is definitely the first step of many for regenerating the town centre.”*

⁴ https://www.luton.gov.uk/Council_government_and_democracy/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/luton-town-centre-masterplan-report.pdf

⁵ <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Local%20Plan/adoption/Luton-Local-Plan-2011-2031-November-2017.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Local%20Plan/Natural%20and%20historic%20environment/ENV%20006.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Local%20Plan/Natural%20and%20historic%20environment/ENV%20004.pdf>

⁸ https://www.semlep.com/modules/downloads/download.php?file_name=742

And: *"I think it is an important asset and obviously it plays a bigger part in the masterplan for Luton in terms of regeneration."*

Also: *"It creates a new, attractive space for the town centre, it's the initial project to kickstart the regeneration programme and it gives it a whole uplift that the town centre is lacking at the moment."*

Another team member felt that it has **achieved more than expected**: *"It always looks nice on a plan but now that it's all opened up and people can see it, the feedback you get from people walking past on the street seems really positive. Because of the funding we've been able to deliver it cheaper than it would have been to actually repair it and turn it back into a carpark."*

All of the stakeholders agreed that the Open Lea project is still relevant and delivers an important service.

One of the stakeholders felt that the project was important due to its **ability to connect people to nature**: *"During Covid and post Covid the importance of connecting people to natural outdoor space has grown. Lockdown has made people re-evaluate their environment, I think. When you've been used to accessing things and then you are told you can't and you have a limited time, that access to the outdoors is even more precious and you want to make sure your experience gives you the biggest bang for your buck. Bringing a more natural experience to the centre of a town which is very grey and hard is very relevant."*

Another stakeholder agreed: *"It's such a grey, concrete, urban town and I think that green infrastructure is the way forward for climate change. The pandemic has shown us how important green spaces are to people and having that access to nature. It's critical, as well as the wider environmental benefits it brings, every little bit towards climate capture, as well as people having a place to stop and eat their lunch, it can really make a difference to people's day. I think it's a brilliant piece of work."*

Another stakeholder talked about the space **celebrating the river**: *"What's really good about it is it's turned an eyesore into something that can really engage the community and it's to a really high standard for the development around it which again, is a really important flag in the ground. A really important aspect which is the river Lea which has very much been forgotten in the town centre where it had become something of a hidden, underground problem and it's now being celebrated and raised. I think it's an absolutely fantastic addition."*

Another person agreed with the **uncovering of the river**: *"We've wholeheartedly met the aims and one of the things that we do struggle with in Luton is that people are often saying to us we need more green space, more places just to go and spend a bit of time. I think people really appreciate that, it's not a big park but you can still have a little wander about, you can go down the steps, there's so many little different aspects to it and having the river run through it is a real bonus as well. I think a lot of people forget that we are on a river because in the Victorian times they built over the river Lea, it was all culverted in the town and built over so to open it up is lovely. People love it when they're sitting by water."*

One further comment was made about the **area being very important to the town**: *"That area is so important for the town, it's one of our major entrances into the shopping centre, 60,000 come into the shopping centre every week and there's more people than that getting the buses etc., it's the key gateway into the town, it's the first and last thing you see really. When it was a council run car park it was practical but not the best-looking thing for a town centre and then it*

was all boarded up with the blue hoarding it was a terrible eyesore and again, probably the first and last thing that you see as you come in. How it looks now is just phenomenal!"

In terms of whether anything has changed in terms of the background and context during the delivery of the project, most of the delivery team felt that not much had changed. One of the delivery team explained how one element of the scheme was updated post the initial design planning stage/tender: *"We brought then river headwall into the site, that was a minor change to the overall scheme. It was a more cost-effective way to deliver the project."*

They also talked about the **impact of Brexit and Covid**: *"The sourcing of materials has been difficult, with Covid it's been hard for the contractors to get the resources in place and it's been difficult to source certain items so that's had a bit of a knock-on effect with our overall programme."*

Another team member talked about the **risks from Covid and Brexit and how they have been minimised**: *"Covid obviously impacted the whole construction industry, as did Brexit in terms of labour and materials shortages. We feel that throughout all of our projects frankly but the contractor we've worked with, we've had a good working relationship with him so although these were big risks, we've managed to mitigate most of them."*

The stakeholders mentioned **Covid and Brexit** as the key areas where things have changed. For example, the **increasing need for green space**: *"The experience of people living in urban areas that have a restricted amount of green space or natural space available to them, something that's not hard and harsh and engineered, to bring that natural element back, the importance of that has increased post Covid definitely."*

Another stakeholder talked about the **changing way in which people use the town centre**: *"We've seen changes in how people use the town centre, how they're engaging with retail and that whole experiential offer. I think Covid certainly had an economic impact but it's also changed habits in how people are using spaces. We've seen far more people occupying the streets in healthy ways but in anti-social ways too. That's definitely increased since Covid, we were a contributor to support the night time economy, we were an active venue in the area and having activation in the space prevented a lot of anti-social behaviour and difficulties. What we've noticed is, we're returning and re-animating the space is that we've got a lot of work to do there. We've got a sort of a shared strategy where we're working with stakeholders and businesses to look at how we can collaborate and animate space with activity events and so forth and I think that will be critical to the future success of this area, the park, but also the whole of that district from the shopping centre to the station. It's not just the responsibility of the council, we all have a responsibility to support and enable an eclectic safe use of all of the spaces round the area."*

Another stakeholder talked about how **hard hit Luton was by Covid**: *"I think Luton was one of the worst hit councils in the country, it's reliance on the airport, how that just came to a standstill as well as the social make up of Luton as well. We were a particularly hard hit demographic nationally and all the things they've had to contend with over the last couple of years. I think Covid has just shown how important nature and green spaces are to everyone. It's great that they managed to do this and not just restore it to a carpark."*

4.2 Project delivery and management

4.2.1 Delivery Team and Stakeholder Feedback on Project Delivery and Management

Is the project being well managed with appropriate governance and management structures in place?

Delivery team and stakeholder participants were asked whether the project was being well managed with appropriate governance and management structures in place.

The delivery team all thought that the project was being well-managed: *"We had weekly reporting, project team meetings, it's very strict anyway with the local authority, we have to follow procurement strategy and making sure that you're getting your quotes and your tenders and that everything is signed off internally by the relevant people and the reporting to the service director and the regeneration director". And: "We've had a strong project management side and architectural side leading the project very well."*

Another team member compared the project to others: *"It's not as well governed as we are doing in our levelling up funded projects but it's a totally different scale to that. I think it had proportional governance and was relevant to what we needed to do."*

Most of the stakeholders felt unable to comment on whether the project is being well-managed but one person said: *"From what I've seen, it seems to be. It looked very organised and it seemed to be being delivered as expected so...it looked pretty good to me."*

4.3 Project Progress and Achievements

4.3.1 Project Spend and Output Achievements

The following table shows the targets and progress to date with an overall RAG assessment⁹.

The capital expenditure has achieved 54% of the target as of September 2022 and is currently given a red status. The delivery team report that there may be an underspend at the end of the project but there could be some few additional works to be completed to protect the planted areas of the park. The revenue spend has been given amber status as it is 91.3% spent at this stage.

The C22 output (surface area of rehabilitated land) has been fully achieved and independently verified through a professionally procured topographical survey in coordination with the Ground Engineer. The C23 output (surface area of habitats) has also been fully achieved and independently verified through a professionally procured topographical survey in coordination with the Ecologist.

⁹ RAG (Red-Amber-Green) ratings, also known as 'traffic lighting,' are used to summarise progress or indicator values, where green denotes a 'complete' or 'exceeded' position, red an 'unfavourable' or 'failing' position and amber a 'neutral' or 'nearly' position.

Table 4.1 - Performance to date (as of September 2022)

Indicator	Target	Spend/Output Achieved	% of target met (& Overall RAG Assessment ⁹)
Total ERDF Capital Expenditure	£908,574	£492,357.10	54.1%
Total ERDF Revenue Expenditure	£49,627	£45,331.59	91.3%
C22: Surface area of rehabilitated land	0.161 ha	0.161 ha	100%
C23: Surface area of habitats	0.08 ha	0.08 ha	100%

Key	
	less than 85%
	between 85% and 95%
	Greater than 95%

4.3.2 Delivery team and stakeholder feedback on progress and achievements

To date, has the project achieved what was expected?

Participants were asked to offer comments on the progress of the project and whether, to date, the project has achieved what was expected. The delivery team all agreed that progress has been good, but there have been **some delays**: *“It has been delayed slightly, that wasn’t down to Covid or Brexit though. There have been slight delays in the programme through design things or a little bit of miscommunication but you’re always going to get that on a project. It would have been nice to have had it opened a few months ago as we had planned, I’m not an expert in this but I think we would have had some more mature plants had we been able to plant them a few months earlier but they’ll grow so that’s fine.”*

Another delivery team interviewee explained that they **started a bit later than planned**: *“It’s perhaps a little bit later than hoped due to a few issues with getting funding agreements signed off and everything with MHCLG at the time who were managing the ERDF pot having quite a lot of churn. It took us a long time to find out who was going to be dealing with our project and to actually send them all the information to get it all signed off.”*

The **stakeholders were all satisfied with progress** with a few noting that the area will look better in the summer and questioning why it is opening in the winter: *“It’s a bit bare now but it’s winter and I’m looking forward to seeing it in the summer.”* And: *“I think there are challenges around the time the pocket park is opening but I’m realistic to the fact that if there is funding available, rather than being concerned about what time the park is going to open, it’s just important that the work gets done. Regardless of when it opens it’s important that we are using that pot of funding from the ERDF to make it happen for the future. It’s obviously a challenge, especially given how cold it is, that it’s opening imminently.”*

Another stakeholder felt that the project has achieved more than expected: *“Yes, the progress has been really good. It has achieved what we expected and probably over and above. It’s better than I anticipated. It was all totally rebuilt and sympathetically done and it just looked so nice. I think actually having it as a tiered thing makes better use on the space. It shows what you can do with a bit of imagination in a small space.”*

4.3.3 Community feedback on progress and achievements

The majority (86%) of the community survey respondents were familiar with the project site. Of these, almost two thirds (63%) said they were familiar with the project works taking place to de-culvert the River Lea. 71% of respondents say that they are looking forward to visiting and spending time at the new open space created by the project.

Of all the community survey respondents, over a third could recall seeing or hearing something in the news or media about the Open Lea Project.

Only 34% of the community survey participants 'agree' that the project works have been disruptive.

4.4 Outcomes and Impacts

4.4.1 Achievement of outcomes and impacts

The following table summarises the outcomes and impacts from the logic chain and comments on the progress towards achieving them. Anecdotal evidence from the community, stakeholder and delivery team surveys shows that the Luton Lea project is making some progress towards all of the outcomes and impacts on the logic chain, but it is still too early to make definitive assertions about achievement.

Table 4.1 – Summary: Logic Chain Outcomes and Impacts

	Indicator	Comment
Outcomes	Improved flooding capacity	Interviewee states that this is in place (see p 29)
	Enhanced ecological value and linking wildlife corridor	Interviewee states that this is in place but may take time to develop (see p 29)
	Retention and attraction of business	Interviewees state that this may happen in the near future (see p 29)
	Health and wellbeing benefits	Interviewee states that this may happen in the future, but may take a while for benefits to accrue (see p 29)
Impacts	Biodiversity gains	Interviewee states that this is may take time for benefits to accrue (see p 29). The Ecological Impact assessment stated that there will be biodiversity gains (see p 33)
	Improved environment to support wider town centre regeneration	All interviewees agree that this project has an improved environment that is the first step in the Luton masterplan (see p 29)
	Less flooding impact	Interviewee states that this is in place (see p 29)
	Health and wellbeing impact	Interviewee states that this may happen in the future, but may take a while for benefits to accrue (see p 29)

4.4.2 Delivery Team and Stakeholder Feedback on Outcomes and Impacts

What progress has been made in achieving the outcomes and impacts of the project?

When asked about what progress has been made in achieving the outcomes and impacts, the delivery team were all very positive.

One team member talked about the **ecological impacts** of the project: *"We've opened up the river and it's created a new habitat for the animals, it's new environment rather than a hard surface car park which was redundant really. I'm assuming that's had a lot of ecological benefit with the water and the planting and everything like that. We've also introduced bee posts within the gabion baskets on the south bank and a couple of tall ones in the planted beds by the*

river. All these elements will help the ecological element, the bee posts were a bit of a late addition, I think our environmental team had a conversation internally while this site was in the development stage so it was a good idea to introduce them."

Another team member discussed **flood alleviation and the green space created**: "It's definitely hit all the outcomes and impacts 100%, because it's done through the design and certainly with regards to the flooding because now, they've opened up the river Lea there's now more area for the water to drain away and into the river, it's only a little stream so it has lots of capacity which is excellent. It opens it up and it's created a green area in a very built-up brick and concrete area, it's a green space and a place to relax which is very good for people's mental wellbeing and for people to go and relax which we didn't have in that area before. Hopefully they will go and enjoy it."

Furthermore, one interviewee talked about the **wider impacts that might accrue over time (economic, ecological, health and well-being)**: *"The impacts are all at slightly different stages, the flooding capacity one is there, the ecological corridor is part there but it will take a while to fully establish and link in because it takes time to mature. I think the retention of business and the attraction of business is something we'll start to see over the next couple of years. I already know from enquiries about vacant buildings that people are interested because of this new pocket park and that might make a difference to them coming to the area. We've got a charity looking to buy two units that back onto the site because of it. Regarding health and well-being, I think it will take a little bit of time to come to fruition and the wider town centre regeneration piece. This is one of the first things really to improve those values and change perceptions and civic pride so that will take a while to fully manifest I guess, it's part of a more systemic change rather than just one project, although this project is an important part of the whole system."*

The stakeholders also talked about the **creation of green space and the impacts for people**: *"It's quite easy to increase the ecological value of something that was just concrete, so whilst there will be benefits (you're going to have birds and insects in the town centre), but the biggest achievement for that site will be the benefits to people and seeing that natural green. That little element is going to be great for new residents moving in and in the 21st century what we want from our towns and urban areas is that we want them to be more green and that ticks a lot of those boxes."*

Another stakeholder talked about the **benefits to local businesses**: *"I think it will be good for the business, it could bring in a younger population coming through like families and stuff. I think it will be positive."*

4.4.3 Community Feedback on Outcomes and Impacts

The majority (70%) of community survey participants believe that there will be benefits from the project. 19% think the works will make the area more attractive and nicer to look at, and 19% welcome the opportunity to have more open and green spaces. 13% think it will benefit children and people in the area, to give them somewhere to spend time.

Of those people that are aware of the Open Lea Project, the majority agree that the project will:

- improve the area - 75%
- encourage people into the town centre – 60%
- encourage people to spend more time in the town centre – 67%

In addition, the majority of participants agree that the project will:

- improve biodiversity and the environment - 73%
- provide health and wellbeing benefits to local people – 73%
- encourage investment and town centre regeneration – 70%

Also , 80% agree that it is important for Luton Borough Council to support and invest in schemes like the Open Lea Project.

4.5 Strategic Impact

4.5.1 Stakeholder Feedback on Strategic Impact

Has the project created Strategic Added Value e.g. through leadership, influence, engagement, collaboration and knowledge exchange?

In consideration of whether the project has created strategic impacts, such as strategic leadership, influence and engagement, most of the stakeholders agreed that it has.

One stakeholder talked about the **2040 vision for Luton**: *“Luton has lots of large-scale projects in the pipeline but I think it’s really positive to see things happening now. I think the pocket park is the first physical output from the 2040 vision and the masterplan so I think that’s a really big tick and it gives people a bit more belief and trust that some of the things planned for the future will actually happen.”*

Another stakeholder talked about **sharing best practice**: *“I think bringing my team out to have a look at the site with the council team was great, sharing best practice and sharing ideas. It’s great, it’s inspiring and definitely beneficial.”*

In addition, **collaboration** was discussed: *“There’s been quite a lot of collaboration because it’s been part of the overall town centre masterplan. We’re having all sorts of meetings with all sorts of agencies, organisations and stakeholders involved in Luton and telling them about what we’re hoping to do and getting their ideas and thoughts and views and they are really keen on the progress updates. I think having the masterplan, it’s brought together a group of stakeholders who may not have got together otherwise, the being part of that has really enhanced that.”*

In a similar vein, another stakeholder talked about **leadership**: *“Leadership-wise I think it has; there’s been talk of the masterplan and what’s going to happen over the next 5, 10 and 20 years in Luton. This is the first development so it’s always the hardest one I think to get started, once that’s done...Then we’ve got The Stage hopefully coming on next year, all sorts of things starting, this is the first step and the council can say ‘yes, we’ve done this, we’re on our journey’ which is tricky to get going really so fair play.”*

But one stakeholder felt that it was **too early to say**: *“So far, no but I think it’s probably early days. We all do our lessons learned and I think the council is very good at sharing knowledge when it’s got the knowledge to share so I imagine that will come in time. It’s really important that councils show leadership and do amazing projects that inspire people by example. I think they’ve done that by doing a project against all odds in a difficult economic climate, by delivering it, I think they’ve set and incredibly good example that physically is there, there’s lots of sharing but there’s a physical tribute to dedication to the team and all involved.”*

4.5.2 Delivery Team and Stakeholder Feedback on Legacy

What do you think will be the project's legacy for businesses, stakeholders and the wider local economy?

When participants were asked about the project's legacy, the delivery team talked about **attracting people into the town centre**: *"I hope it will become a place for local residents and businesses to use and that it will help attract people. When you're walking into the shopping centre it opens up the space from the train station and makes it far more pleasurable and a nicer environment. I hope the legacy is that it's starting that improvement and welcoming more people into the town."*

On a similar note: *"It's a place that keeps everybody happy and provides something different for the town centre so you can have that quiet contemplation away from the hustle and bustle and it creates those opportunities that you just don't get when you've got your head down looking at your phone. Hopefully it connects people back to each other and nature and stuff. It overlooks our Covid memorial which is quite nice, we thought it would be a nice place for people to sit and contemplate."*

One stakeholder talked about the legacy being part of the **wider vision for Luton**: *"I think it's all part of the wider regeneration of the area, that Luton is an attractive town to be proud of. I think that's what it's all building towards. It's in a certain place now and people know it needs work but I think it's really got vision and we can make it work. I think this is a really good starting point with that vision."*

Another person talked about **improving the perception of Luton town centre**: *"I think it will help to improve the perception of Luton because as visitors pass through and see that area they will notice a significant change in how that area looks and feels."*

Another stakeholder felt that it was the **space for the community** that is the legacy: *"I think it's absolutely set a new standard in an area that was forgotten, dismissed, ignored and useless and it's now become something that's aspirational, useful, inspiring, free, open and generous. I think that's something that's overwhelmingly successful about the project, there's a generosity of giving for the community because it's space that isn't commercial, you don't have to go in there and spend money, you just go in there and relax and consider your wellbeing."*

In addition, another person talked about the **connections made between key people**: *"One of the biggest legacies is the group of stakeholders who are now connected with each other. Lots were connected anyway but those strong links that we've made, and they're not just businesses, they are community groups and youth groups and other organisations who have got together in a way that has put together something positive for the town. I think those links are going to be there for a long time, that's one of the real positives. I think it's helped our council officers to draw up a fuller list of stakeholders."*

Another stakeholder talked about the **legacy for business**: *"I think it does give Luton a better name, there's the train station and we have a lot of commuters and a lot of people stay here because of the airport so when they see things like this it gives a better name to the town and people will find it more pleasant to stay. In terms of businesses, it's just making it a nicer area to operate in. For our business I think we will get busier and it will attract a lot more families, it will become somewhere that people go with their kids, I think it will give us a different kind of target market."*

4.5.3 Progress regarding the Horizontal Principles

Regarding the **Environmental Sustainability Principle**, an Ecological Impact Assessment¹⁰ was undertaken and it was found that:

- The works are likely to have a significant positive effect on the River Lea by creating more wildlife-friendly habitat which will act as a stepping stone between other suitable habitat along the water course.
- The works are likely to have no significant negative effect to protected species on site and there will be no residual impacts.
- As the scheme will include planting wildlife friendly species on site, reinstatement of the chalk bed in the river and putting up bat and bird boxes, the scheme will result in a biodiversity gain.

Regarding the **Equal Opportunities and Non-discrimination Principle**, as noted in the last progress report (September 2022), the Luton Leas site is located in a highly sustainable location for arriving by public transport and is located in a densely populated/occupied part of the town making access readily available to a large portion of the public. The location and footfall of the site makes this a very accessible site to a lot of people where there is an identified need for green and open spaces. This will have numerous health, well-being and amenity benefits.

4.5.4 Delivery Team and Stakeholder Feedback on the Horizontal Principles

What contribution has the project made to the Horizontal Principles – Environmental Sustainability and Equality and Diversity?

Respondents were asked to consider the project's contribution to the horizontal and cross-cutting themes. One person talked about the **environmental contribution**: *"It's all about the surface water and dealing with that properly, getting it back into the river flow. We've opened up all the flower beds to allow the natural water just to percolate back into the water table. I think as it's an open park there's going to be a lot of congregations there in the town centre and hopefully that will encourage the community to use that space. We've introduced some contemporary furniture with some light boxes and things and hopefully that will attract the younger generation as well."*

On a similar note: *"I think opening it up, taking it from concrete, sorting out the drainage, all the green plants that have been planted and the trees can only be a positive. What we have now will open it up for more animals and increase the habitats. Hopefully it will attract some wildlife into that area you would hope."*

Another person talked about the **equality and diversity perspective**: *"The town centre is one of our most deprived areas and providing these kind of spaces helps us with our equality agenda and providing a diverse mix of spaces and activities to all our residents so it's good from an equality perspective that we're putting these in areas of the most need."*

One of the stakeholders talked about **environmental sustainability**: *"If you've got any kind of green infrastructure, the whole climate change agenda, in terms of mitigation and adaptation, in terms of mitigating it, any green infrastructure is going to absorb carbon so it will help to combat the emissions we're making, carbon sequestration. Also, in terms of adaptation it's made this whole area that can flood and absorb floodwater without damaging properties and*

¹⁰ Ecological Impact Assessment Report, MLM Consulting Engineers Limited, February 2021 (p23)

not being a risk to life as opposed to how it was before, just flowing in a culvert. It's a huge leap in terms of sustainability".

They went on to discuss **equality and diversity**: *"I think Luton has 52% BAME residents whereas I think the national average is about 14%. We know the BAME populations have unequal access to green space and have unequal impact of the effects of climate change so being a very high proportion of BAME are, any amounts of green space that can be provided will certainly help that whole EDI agenda."*

4.6 Value for Money

4.6.1 Feedback on Value for Money

Has the Open Lea project provided good value for money?

The stakeholders were asked to comment on whether they felt the project has achieved value for money and whether they can benchmark against any other similar projects. Most of the stakeholders felt unable to comment on this, but one person gave positive feedback: *"Yes, I do actually. It has given good value for money, it's all relative isn't it, everything seems expensive these days and when you do any project and they tell you how much it's going to cost, you think wow, really, because things are expensive. Inevitably they end up more but what it brings is so high in non-monetary value to people because it's a space that they've been wanting for a long time."*

Another stakeholder discussed the **importance of the ERDF funding**: *"Yes, because they managed to get all this EU funding. I suppose it's who is it value for money for, for the council yes, it was cheaper because of the ERDF funding they got, it made it cheaper to make it into a park than it did to return it to a carpark. If they returned it to a carpark the council would have to pay for it all but with the EU funding the park became much better value for the council. I think it's a great selling point and if I could talk to the 36 local authorities on my patch and tell them that it would be cheaper to make something into a park rather than concrete it over then it's a great case study for me to have."*

5 Lessons learned

Lessons learned were collected from the delivery team and the stakeholders and these are presented thematically below.

5.1 Design

One team member talked about the design stage and ensuring that the **design is properly implemented**: *"We need to make sure that that information is passed across to the contractor in a strong fashion so no-one misinterprets the design intent. There's been a couple of moments on site where they've not got it quite right or where we've caught it in time to rectify it so as not to cause any delays. We've been on top of things while it's been in progress. I just wanted to make sure that the project is run properly and if there's any queries from the contractors they're dealt with and don't get lost."*

Another team member suggested that it would have been good to have **more green areas**: *"It would have been nice to have a bit more green, green space but because of its constraints of needing to be a functioning public space and enable people to get to the river, it couldn't be too soft otherwise it would have been destroyed with just people walking over it. It needs to have an element of practicality to it and that perhaps isn't always aligned with the full vision that we would have liked to achieve but it's got to be like that for practical reasons. I guess it's a victim of its own success, it will be popular so it can't be as soft and green as we would have perhaps liked."*

One of the stakeholders talked about **engagement and collaboration**: *"It's taught us a lot about collaboration and making sure we engage stakeholders at an early stage, they were involved in the early designs and ideas. Some people don't want to get involved because they think it's just going to be a talking shop but this had a different vibe about it. That early engagement is definitely a lesson that we'll take forward with other things as well."*

Another stakeholder talked about **community involvement**: *"I think it would have been nice to have a community/stakeholder groups involved, some of the neighbours, some of the stakeholders might have been involved in the design process. It would have created a real sense of connectivity and inclusion and that would probably help the pocket park integrate into what we're doing and other stakeholders may have similar voices about how to integrate their priorities into the public space. Sometimes that can hinder and add length and complications to a project so I do understand why they haven't done that because you can spend a lot of time creating community stakeholder groups and sometimes resources are best focused on the capital works but from our perspective that would have been a great way for us to contribute more to it".*

5.2 Delivery

A team member talked about how they might change to **do more at once**: *"I think what we'd do differently when more of it is delivered, is that we can start to break out the riverbed and reinstate it as a chalk stream but you can't do that in small chunks. You've got to do it as a much bigger piece otherwise it messes with riverbed quality too much which is one of the things I had to learn about which I didn't understand at the start. That will have an impact on how we deliver things and how the scheme is realised. It will mean then having to link up different projects through a new project kind of thing as we unpick the riverbed and making sure we've got those key stakeholders in Environment Agency, Natural England and the water companies*

on board. There's quite a lot of different funding streams that can be called upon for different reasons that we're trying to accumulate to make maximum use of future projects."

5.3 Administration

One person talked about **continuity of staff and ensuring the right information is collected from the beginning, in case people leave the project**: *"It's a very small team, the project manager left in October and another manager has taken over, he's an architect, but he's been involved with the project all the way through, so they've kept the continuity of staff but the project manager leaving before the end of it isn't ideal. If you get ERDF funding, start collecting the information they want on day one."*

5.4 Policy

One stakeholder talked about **taking risks and undertaking difficult projects**: *"I hope that the lesson learned is to take risks and to do something that seems quite challenging and not to give up on achieving the vision of a project despite economic, political issues that can sometimes come in from the side. To have the conviction to keep going and to get the rewards that have been achieved, I hope that is the lesson learned. They are difficult projects, capital projects of this nature, anything that involves exploration and digging, you always find things that you would never have known were there despite the surveys that you do. I think that is the lesson learned that one wouldn't be put off or that the council or any of the funders wouldn't be put off any future projects of equal scale and ambition simply because it's difficult. Some of the best things come from difficult and challenging uncharted ground work."*

Another stakeholder talked about **promoting Luton Open Leas as a case study**: *"I think this is a great case study and should be promoted as that as widely as possible, and outside of Luton. I think Luton has great vision and their 2040 vision is brilliant and I think that this is a major case study in showing how they are bringing that to life which other councils could and should take a lot on inspiration from."*

6 Conclusions

As the Luton Lea project reaches its final stages, there have been a lot of positive findings highlighted through this summative assessment. The project contributes to key policy and strategy areas and everyone interviewed agreed that the project is still relevant and delivers an important service. There have been some changes in context and background, with the Covid pandemic and Brexit as the main areas identified.

There was agreement that the project is being well managed with appropriate governance and management structures in place.

The project has achieved its outputs of surface area of rehabilitated land and surface area of habitats, but there is currently an underspend on the capital expenditure. Anecdotal evidence from the community, stakeholder and delivery team surveys shows that the Luton Lea project is making progress towards all of the outcomes and impacts on the logic chain, but it is still too early to make definitive assertions about achievement.

Stakeholders reported that strategic impacts have been created too, including contributing to the 2040 vision for Luton, sharing best practice, collaboration and leadership. In terms of legacy, interviewees discussed attracting people into the town centre, the wider vision for Luton, improving the perception of Luton town centre, space for the community, the connections made between key people and the legacy for business. Many lessons learned have also been collated through the summative assessment process.

The majority of the community are in support of the project, with 80% of the community survey respondents agreeing that it is important for Luton Borough Council to support and invest in schemes like the Open Lea Project.