

Greening the Grey (Wildlife Ways)

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ERDF Assessment Final Report

Report to Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

March 2023



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Greening the Grey (Wildlife Ways)

Greening the Grey - ERDF Evaluation and Assessment

Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways is a project aiming to improve the wildlife value and biodiversity of open spaces and highway verges and connect these interconnecting green corridors and spaces within the borough of Solihull.

This report evaluates the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)-funded activity through a formal summative assessment.

Background to the Summative Assessment

This report has been produced in accordance with the requirements and guidance in the ESIF Summative Assessment Guidance. It takes forward the Baseline Report of March 2021 and the Interim Report documenting progress with the project up to June 2021.

This report documents and evaluates the impact of the project across all objectives and sites.

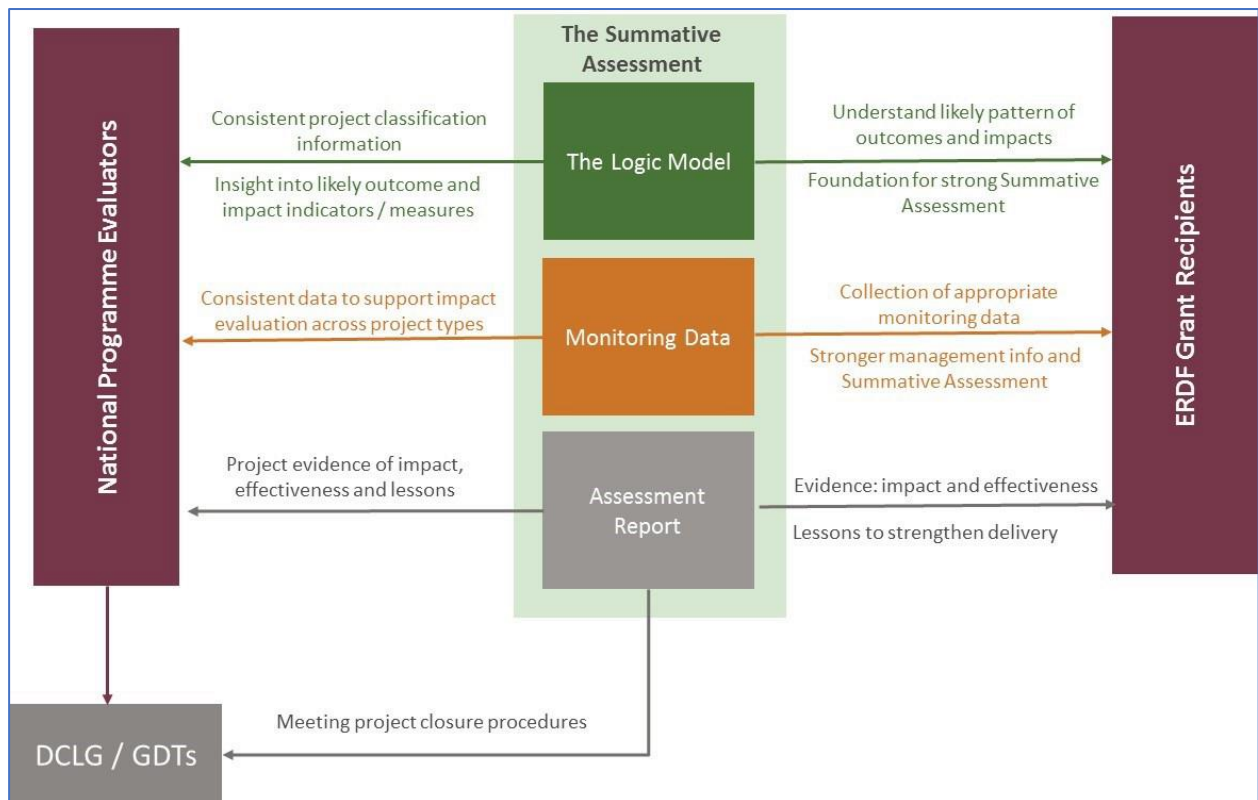
This report will be shared with project stakeholders to help them in the planning of future projects and the future management and maintenance of the assets created and improved by the project.

The report addresses the five areas scoped in the ESIF Summative Assessment Guidance:

- **Relevance and consistency:** the summative assessments must explore the continued relevance and consistency of the project, in light of any changes in policy or economic circumstances during its delivery period.
- **Progress:** the summative assessments will set out the progress of the project against contractual targets, any reasons for under or over performance, and the expected lifetime results.
- **Delivery and management:** the summative assessment must explore the experience of implementing and managing the project and any lessons which have emerged from this.
- **Impacts:** the summative assessment, where possible, must show the economic impact attributable to the project, including both the intended and actual outcomes and impact.
- **Assessing value for money:** the summative assessments must analyse the cost-effectiveness of the project in light of its intended and unintended outcomes and impacts, and hence its value for money.

As well as evaluating progress and delivery through reviewing progress reports, records of expenditure, claims etc. delivery of the project has been assessed by looking at on the ground works with particular attention being given to the habitat improvement underpinning the project's contracted outputs.

Some of these were delivered directly by Solihull Council, but others are being delivered through the GBSLEP Small Habitats Grants (SHG) Programme, which was extended considerably from the original project proposal. The Wildlife Ways element of the project were essentially completed by mid-2021, however some of the SHG projects have not yet been fully completed. Their deadline for completion is June 2023.



The summative Assessment Process – source: ESIF Guidance

This report reviews progress (including delivery of outputs and spend profile), significant variations and captures lessons learned through project delivery.

The Wildlife Ways elements of the project have been completed. Most of the grant programme projects are complete or have only minor works outstanding as of March 2023.

Note that Wildlife Ways has incorporated additional elements (Travel Business Support, Engagement, Benefits Realisation, and on-going Wildlife Ways Project Development and Indirect Costs) which were not ERDF funded and are out of scope of the Summative Assessment.

Project Team

This report has been prepared by **NW Environmental Limited**.

We have been assisted and supported by our associates:

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Project Description

Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways is major project, reaching its final stages, aiming to 'create a network of high-quality spaces woven into the fabric of the borough of Solihull'. The original elements of the project were:

Creating green corridors in Solihull, connecting parks, urban centres and employment sites by building green access corridors. The project will improve green infrastructure through enhancements to verges, parks, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands. The network will absorb CO2 emissions; help control storm water quantity and water quality to mitigate flooding and the risk of pollution supporting the biodiversity agenda through enabling wildlife connectivity for both floral and faunal species.

Creating greener urban centres – Solihull Town Centre and Kingshurst Village Centre – through the incorporation of additional tree planting, the creation of pollinator planting schemes and the utilisation of green wall and living roof techniques. Interventions that will not only improve the physical appearance of our urban centres, but which also have the added benefits of providing a source of habitat for wildlife and helping to improve air cooling and air quality and surface water drainage.

Enabling a greener GBSLEP through the delivery of a GBSLEP wide Habitats Grants Programme, enabling eligible organisations from across the GBSLEP to deliver green and blue infrastructure improvements at a smaller scale delivering 20 hectares of habitat improvement.

The 'creating greener urban centres' theme was withdrawn from the project before approval. The final project focused on green corridors through Wildlife Ways and enabling a greener GBSLEP through a Small Habitats Grant Scheme.

Project Title

Greening the Grey was the application title to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in the original European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Priority 6 application.

The programme has been called **Wildlife Ways** by Solihull MBC as part of the marketing of the improvements. Wildlife Ways has incorporated additional project elements (Travel Business Support, Engagement, Benefits Realisation, and on-going Wildlife Ways Project Development and Indirect Costs) which were not included in the ERDF application 'Greening the Grey' application, and therefore are out of scope of this Summative Assessment.

The delivery of the project chiefly comprises work in three areas:

1. The creation of green corridors throughout Solihull; enhancing verges, parks, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands with the aim of improving green infrastructure and supporting the biodiversity agenda through enabling wildlife connectivity for both floral and faunal species.
2. The delivery of a Small Habitats Grants Programme across the whole of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) – Birmingham, Solihull, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Wyre Forest, Cannock, Lichfield, Tamworth and East Staffordshire. Aimed at the delivery of smaller scale habitat improvement schemes – either blue or green infrastructure improvements and valued at between £50,000 to £500,000.
3. There is an element of support for project staffing and other revenue elements.

The Programme

The Greening the Grey programme is made up of three elements:

1. Green corridors in Solihull

The creation of green corridors throughout Solihull; enhancing verges, parks, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands with the aim of improving green infrastructure and supporting the biodiversity agenda through enabling wildlife connectivity for both floral and faunal species.

The aim of the network of green spaces was not only to improve 73 hectares of land to attain better conservation status but also to create and/or enhance green access corridors that support sustainable transport solutions across the borough – enabling access to green spaces through green spaces.

23km of corridor improvements have also included the construction of new route way, constructed in accordance with Sustainable urban Drainage Scheme (SuDS) design principles incorporating permeable surfacing. The network will absorb CO₂ emissions; help control storm water quantity and the risk of pollution, supporting the biodiversity agenda through enabling wildlife connectivity for both floral and faunal species.

The ERDF Programme for this Green and Grey element totals £10.5m

2. GBSLEP Small Habitats Grants Programme

The Small Habitats Grants Programme is being delivered across the whole of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) – Birmingham, Solihull, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Wyre Forest, Cannock, Lichfield, Tamworth and East Staffordshire. Aimed at the delivery of smaller scale habitat improvement schemes – either blue or green infrastructure improvements and valued at between £50,000 to £500,000.

Due to the delivery being across the whole of the GBSLEP has meant that the funding has been split between More Developed and Transitional. The More Developed funding was to be spent on projects delivered in Birmingham, Solihull, Redditch, Bromsgrove and Wyre Forest and the Transitional funding was to be spent in Cannock, Lichfield, Tamworth and East Staffordshire.

The programme originally aimed to deliver 20 Hectares of habitat improvement across the GBSLEP. The target increased when project change request 4 was approved to 37 hectares in addition to the timescale for delivery being extended from September 2022 to an activity end date of April 2023 with the financial completion of June 2023, with the final claim submitted July 2023. The value of the grant element of GTG increased to £3.54m.

3. Support elements

The remainder of ERDF funding is allocated to the staffing budget and other revenue.

Scope of Assessment

This evaluation has made an assessment against the following criteria:

- **Relevance and Consistency:** The Summative Assessment must explore the continued relevance and consistency of the project, in light of any changes in policy or economic circumstances during its delivery period.
- **Progress:** The Summative Assessment will set out the progress of the project against contractual targets, any reasons for under or over performance, and expected lifetime results.
- **Delivery and Management:** The Summative Assessment should explore the experience of implementing and managing the project and any lessons which have emerged from this.
- **Impacts:** The summative Assessment, where possible, must show the impact attributable to the project, including both the intended and actual outcomes and impact.
- **Assessing Value for Money:** The Summative Assessment must analyse the cost-effectiveness of the project in light of its intended and unintended outcomes and impacts, hence its value for money.
- **Future Support Needs Assessment:** The Summative Assessment should also explore the future support needs and on-going relevancy of a project of this type in relation to a changing funding arena.

Each of these areas is examined in detail below.

Relevancy and Consistency

The context of the project and the market failure which it addresses, as set out in the Logic Model (**Appendix 4**) have not changed. If anything, the urgency and importance concerted action to address climate change and biodiversity loss at international, national and local levels has increased.

The original application stated, “Investing in Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) makes sound economic sense – as highlighted in the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity study and the Natural Environment White paper ‘The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature (2011)’”. This fundamental statement justified the original project and continues to be the case.

The application also noted “The investments detailed in this project are either not provided by markets at all, or where they are supported by markets- through enterprises and/or developers - they are not delivered in a cohesive or targeted manner.” This continues to be the case, if anything it has become even more difficult to access resources for large scale green infrastructure projects.

This project set out to combat the identified market failure through channelling public investment into Solihull’s environmental infrastructure; meeting the vision laid out in Solihull’s Green Infrastructure Study (2014) where: “by 2025 Solihull aims to provide a network of attractive, high quality, accessible green spaces that are managed and developed, recognising the Borough’s landscape character and local distinctiveness, to meet the diverse needs of the community and the natural environment. Our green spaces should be safe, clean and maintained in a sustainable way, becoming an important element of everyday life, for the future enjoyment and well-being of all.” This context remains relevant.

There can be no doubt that the project remains aligned with local and national policy for the addressing climate change and biodiversity conservation. In particular, the project remains consistent with and supports the ambitions set out in *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services* and the *Government’s 25-Year Environment Plan*, the project is highly relevant to addressing these policy issues.

Progress

After a delayed start, largely caused by the complexity of the tendering process, material delivery got under way in Q1 2019.

During the period March to June 2021 we undertook monitoring visits to virtually all of the Wildlife Ways Green Routes, the Wildlife Ways Habitat Improvement sites and GBSLEP Small Habitats Grant Scheme sites.

Assessments for each component of delivery are listed in the following appendices:

Final Report Appendix 1 - Wildlife Ways Green Routes

Final Report Appendix 2 - Wildlife Ways Habitat Sites

Final Report Appendix 3 - GBSLEP Small Habitats Grant Scheme Sites

As of Q2 2021 the works planned for the Wildlife Ways elements (green corridors and habitat sites) had been materially finished to a high standard. Most of the first tranche of Small Habitats Grant projects were still in delivery, and these were largely completed over winter 2021/22.

Additional funding was secured to extend the SHG, so further rounds of applications were undertaken. As of March 2023 these projects are mostly complete with two in their final stages, with material completion expected by end of April 2023.

The project is required to deliver the following specific ERDF outputs by project end:

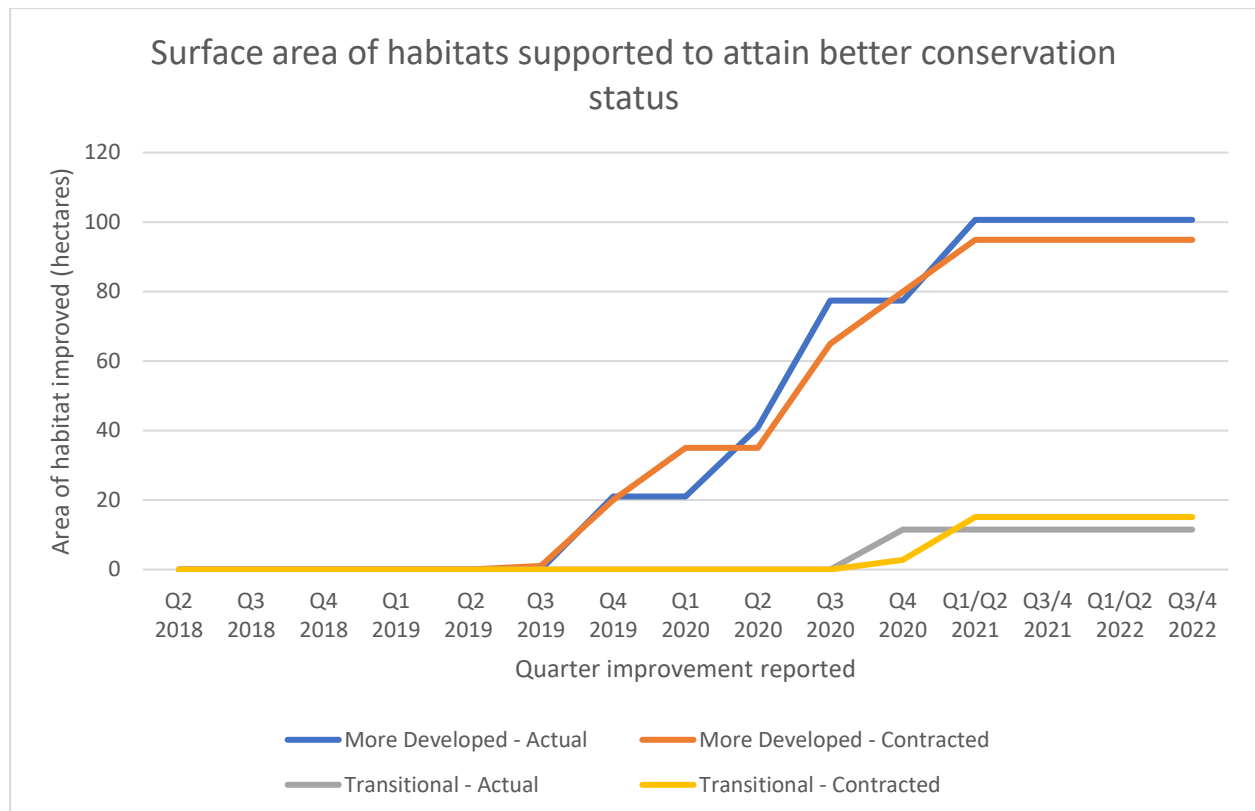
- To improve the biodiversity and attain a better conservation status of 93 hectares of land throughout the Solihull borough and GBSLEP area.

This is measured and reported as:

- C23 Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status (ha)

i.e. Improvements to a defined area of existing habitat(s) that have in place a management plan which can demonstrate how the proposed activity being undertaken will improve the biodiversity of the site. Public access to the site will be required to demonstrate the economic benefit to an area. Activity can be associated with one species or include wider habitat improvements and include associated access improvements where this is non statutory Rights of Way.

The following graph shows the projects reported outputs against contracted outputs up to the end of Q4 2022.



As off the end of 2022the project has exceeded its target for More Developed Areas.

The project was 3.61ha behind target for transitional areas, however it is forecast to deliver this additional area by the end of April 2023 with final transitional projects coming to an end and final output claims following submission of the Ecology team approved management plans.

Initially delivery was slow due to delays related to the open tender process. The Council report the following explanation:

“The landscapes team put all of the landscape works in one OJEU tender – benefiting the standard of works, timescales and cost. Initially, this has meant a later start date and delayed costs being defrayed however long term will be of huge benefit to the team and the project having one contractor throughout. It also ensures compliance and less risk at audit when it comes to procurement.”

This resulted in a reprofiling of outputs and this new profile has been used in the graph above. Delivery has thereafter remained close to or above the reforecast projection.

Delivery was effectively split into three categories, reviewed in subsequent pages:

- Wildlife Ways Green Corridors
- Wildlife Ways Habitat Improvement Sites
- Small Habitats Grant Scheme

Original Application

The original Application was submitted on 18 January 2018. The project was submitted under Priority Axis 6: Preserving and Protecting the Environment and Promoting Resource Efficiency

The originally proposed outputs were:

- 73 hectares of land to attain better conservation status through green corridors.
- 20 hectares of land to attain better conservation status through the habitats grants programme.

A total of 93 hectares.

The following table shows the original proposed funding profile, this was amended slightly as approved (see next section).

		ESIF (a) (£)	Public Match (b) (£)	Private Match (c) (£)	Total (d) (£)	ESIF Contribution rate (%)
	ERDF capital	6,377,792	6,377,792		12,755,584	50%
	ERDF revenue	732,924	732,924		1,465,848	50%
Sub Total	ERDF	7,110,716				50%
TOTAL		7,110,716	7,110,716		14,221,432	50%

The original project timetable was April 2018 to March 2021.

Project Changes

The second of the original project themes (creating greener centres) was later removed from the project's scope. Following approval, some minor changes were made to the green routes to accommodate shared junctions with the UK Central project. Other minor changes were made to minimise impacts on street trees.

Four Project Change Requests have been approved for the project:

PCR 1 - Approved 24-04-19

This change extended the timetable for project delivery, amending milestones as appropriate. The fundamental reason was given as uncertainties around Brexit.

- Extension to project length. End date April 2022
- Extension to Small Grants Project length to December 2022

There was no change to the financial projections.

PCR 2 - Approved 07-01-20

This was a minor change to allow existing in-house staff to work on the project due to recruitment issues.

PCR 3 - Approved 11-06-20

This was a minor change moving around £93,000 from revenue to capital expenditure and changing revenue expenditure allocations.

PCR 4.1 - Approved Jan 2021

This extended the Small Grants Habitat Programme, requesting additional funding to deliver an additional 12 Ha of Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status in the Transitional area and a further 5 Ha in the More Developed area (by moving remaining ERDF from the Main Programme to the Small Grants Programme).

This increased the ERDF funding requirement from £7,102,995 to £7,659,738, with a commensurate increase in match funding to give an overall spend of £15,319,476.

To achieve these extra outputs the Small Habitats Grants Programme activity was extended to April 2023 with financial completion June 2023.

As a result of this change the project's contracted outputs are now:

- 73 hectares of land to attain better conservation status through green corridors.
- 37 hectares of land to attain better conservation status through the habitats grants programme.

This is a total target of 110 hectares which the Council expect to exceed comfortably (the total as of end 2022 was 100.6 ha)

Wildlife Ways Green Corridors

The Green Corridor works distributed across the Borough were split into two parts – 23km of new corridors and 69km of enhanced existing corridors. Associated with these two parts was the improvement of 16ha of habitat along the corridors, in addition to 55ha within parks and open spaces.

Between February and June 2021, either entire sections or sample stretches of ‘Greening The Grey’s’ ‘Wildlife Ways’ routes were visited. Further sites were inspected in 2022. The initial spring inspections were largely aimed at ‘getting a feel’ for the project – its delivery and achievements, as well as an opportunity for familiarisation of Solihull Borough as a whole. The early summer visits provided an opportunity to observe what progress has been made with regards the hard landscape elements, as well as the transformation of the soft landscaping from the predominantly early spring bulb displays to the summer bulb and meadow flowers.

The availability of more details and background information surrounding the works undertaken has led to a wider understanding and knowledge of the project’s physical outcomes and the context in which they have been delivered.

The delivery partnership should be highly commended for the vision and ambition of the project. This should also extend to its delivery and outcomes. The practicalities of delivering a project of this scale are challenging enough under normal circumstances, but to undertake it during a global pandemic adds a whole new level of obstacles and uncertainties.

To have achieved the outcomes documented above is testament to the skills and qualities of the delivery team. Any criticisms were minor and of little significance in the context of the scale of delivery.

The site visits were split roughly north and south across the borough.

Southern area

The site works in the southern half of the borough largely focused on highway verge greening schemes and shared routes developments.

These routes feature several of the main strategic roads accessing the south of the borough and leading into the town centre. They include Lode Lane, Hobbs Moat Road and Solihull Bypass. These are also the roads that lead to and from two of the region’s main arterial routes – the A45 and M42 motorway. In addition, there are also two further arterial routes – Streetsbrook Road and Stratford Road (A34), both providing the Borough with direct links to Birmingham, with the latter also connecting to the M42.

Northern area

The site works in the northern half of the borough also largely focused on highway verge greening schemes and shared routes developments, although it also included several areas of public open space such as Low Brook, Bluebell Recreation Ground, Cole Bank, Babb’s Mill Recreation Ground, Marston Green Woodland, and Kinghurst Brook.

These routes feature several of the main strategic roads linking Castle Bromwich and Kingshurst in the north with Chelmsley Wood and Marston Green in the south. The presence of the extensive Birmingham Airport site largely prevents Borough residents from gaining direct access to Solihull town centre and the southern portion of the Borough, except by circumnavigating it to the west (via Sheldon / Birmingham area) or to the east via Bickenhill Parkway and Bickenhill Lane. The main strategic highways include Chester Road, Water Orton Road, Auckland Drive, Windward Way, Moorend Avenue, Coleshill Road, and Coleshill Heath Road

Project activities carried out have included the creation and upgrading of surfaced shared routes complete with signage, tactile paving drop kerbs, and chicane barriers; planting of standard trees; hedgerow planting; Pictorial Meadow installation; wildflower and meadow turf installation; wildflower seeding and bulb planting.

New Corridors

New Corridors aimed to offer high quality access provision on corridors that currently have limited facilities. Thus they addressed missing gaps within the existing cycling network and help ensure that users are provided with a high-quality coherent network across many parts of the Borough.

In the north of Solihull, the existing network runs along key arterial routes to connect with Birmingham Airport, Birmingham Business Park and the planned UK Central developments. The new corridors enhance this provision by helping to create a consistent network and improve access from areas such as Marston Green and Kingshurst.

The green corridors surrounding Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) at Lode Lane will improve links to key employment sites and offer a continuous provision of cycling infrastructure from Solihull Town Centre to north Solihull. The corridors extending along key arterial routes from Solihull Town Centre will enhance cycling connectivity in parts of south Solihull, and link together sections of the existing network to improve access to employment sites, shops and services in the Town Centre.

The enhanced route network and associated environmental improvements will absorb CO₂ emissions and help control storm water quantity, mitigating flooding and lowering the risk of pollution.

The programme supports the concept of sustainable travel through providing attractive, safe walking and cycling routes, and, at the same time, support the biodiversity agenda for animal and flora habitats through enabling connectivity to existing open spaces and parks within the Borough.

Enhancement to existing networks

Many of the existing green corridors in north Solihull benefited from the same landscape interventions as the proposed new green corridors. These principally comprised wildflower areas, trees, and some hedgerows. At higher profile locations, high quality 100% wildflower turf was used, comprised of pre-grown perennials (both native and non-native) that flower between early spring and mid-autumn.

Elsewhere, meadow-type grassland was developed by scarifying and seeding and managed to promote the prevalence of wildflowers over grasses. In places where amenity grass is more desirable, bulbs will be planted, and some will be used in more informal grassland. Trees were planted in amenity grass verges or in groups within long grass/wildflower areas.

Outcomes anticipated in the application were:

- Reduced CO₂ emissions
- Improved life expectancy
- Increased physical activity in adults
- Increase in residents being able to access strategic centres
- Reduction in the number of personal injury collisions
- Enhanced access to green space for local residents and an increase in numbers of visitors using the sites
- 73 ha of habitat enhancement for greater biodiversity
- Educational benefits and greater understanding of biodiversity through marketing and engagement, interpretation, and signage

- Sense of local pride and ownership

Long-term benefits anticipated in the application were:

- Improved health quality and well-being
- Increase in environmental benefits, including air quality and amenity value
- Improved connectivity of people to businesses, jobs, and markets
- Reduced absenteeism and increased productivity
- Change in modal share for commuter trips
- Reduced peak period congestion, journey times and delays
- Increased accessibility to business sites
- Improved green space and a high-quality environment makes the area more attractive to investment
- Delivering the Government's biodiversity 2020 strategy at a local level by creating more, better connected wildlife sites
- Increasing and strengthening the natural environment to deliver ecosystem services across the region
- Reversing the decline in ecosystem services; restoring and enhancing degraded ecosystems, halting biodiversity loss
- Responding to a changing climate and allowing species of flora and fauna to spread or move along green corridors
- Water quality improvements in line with the Water Framework Directive
- A model/ case study for other local authorities, regionally and nationally

Routes

Twenty-eight green corridors were identified for establishment (A-O) or upgrading (1-13 as part of Wildlife Ways. These were:

- A. Elmdon Park as part of 'Lode Lane to Valley Road'
- B. Elmdon Park is also a feature of the section 'Damson Parkway to A45'
- C. Damson Parkway again features as part of this route – 'Solihull Town Centre to A45', together with Yew Tree, Hampton Lane, Damson Lane Park, Wherrets Lane
- D. Station Road, Bickenhill Road, Coleshill Heath Road all fall within 'Chester Road to Marston Green Station'
- E. 'Coleshill Heath Road / Elmdon Lane' plus Helmswood Drive, Berwicks Lane, Digby Drive
- F. 'Gloucester Way to Coleshill Road' includes Marston Green and Kingshurst Brook (excl. grassland and river enhancement) and Chapelhouse Road
- G. Forth Drive, Meriden Park, Chelmsley Road, Conway Road are within this section 'Cooks Lane to Moorend Avenue'
- H. Babbs Mill Recreation Ground is part of 'Babbs Mill to Cooks Lane'
- I. 'Hall Road to Chester Road' includes Bradford Road
- J. 'Wagon Lane to Keswick Road'
- K. 'Streetsbrook Road' and Station Approach
- L. 'Monkspath Hall Road to St Alphege' features Tudor Grange Park
- M. Did not go forward as part of the project
- N. 'Malvern Park'
- O. 'Green Lane to Castle Bromwich' with Winward Way and West Avenue

It was originally envisaged that the construction of these new shared use routes would be undertaken in three phases:

Phase 1 – Routes G to J, L, and O	November 2018 to July 2019
Phase 2 – Routes A to F	June 2019 to September 2020
Phase 3 – Routes K, M, and N	July 2020 to October 2020

Their associated habitat improvement works were completed under three different phases:

Phase 1 – Routes A, B, H to J, L and O (Route M not progressed)	December 2018 to February 2020 (Route M not progressed)
Phase 1 and 2 – Routes D to G, K, and N	December 2018 to December 2020
Phase 2 and 3 – Route C	September 2019 to March 2021

Existing Routes

1. 'Water Orton Road' with Marlborough Road
2. 'Chester Road' including Bradford Road, Winward Way, Ringmere Avenue, Whateley Crescent, Moxhull Road, Bluebell Drive
3. 'Auckland Drive' with Winward Way
4. 'Moorend Avenue'
5. 'Bickenhill Parkway' plus Coleshill Heath Road, Bickenhill Lane
6. Did not go forward as part of the project
7. 'Lode Lane'
8. 'Catherine de Barnes' featuring Bickenhill Village
9. 'Hampton Lane'
10. 'Glebe Road, Cornyx Lane'
11. 'Warwick Road'
12. 'Stratford Road'
13. 'Monkspath Hall Road'

Phasing of Habitat Works

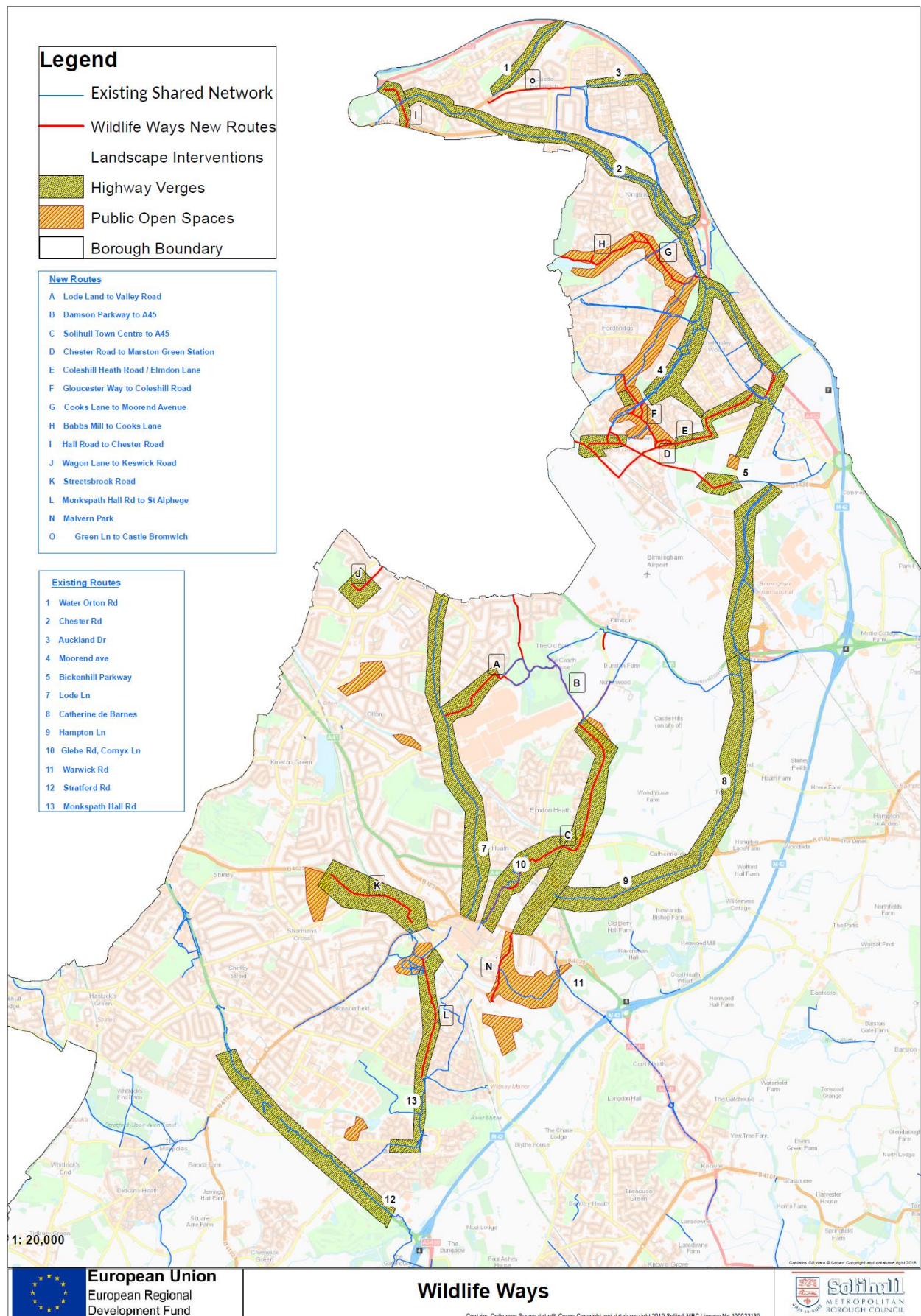
It was envisaged that the habitat improvement works to the existing routes would be undertaken in three phases:

Phase 1 – Routes 1, 3 to 5, 7 to 11, and 13	Dec 2018 (Sept 2019 for 11 & 13) to Dec 2019
Phase 1 and 2 – Route 2	Dec 2018 to March 2020
Phase 3 – Route 12	Sept 2019 to March 2021

Where these existing routes pass through Council-owned parks and public open spaces the following additional works were envisaged to occur:

Grassland management	October 2018 to Sept 2020
Woodland management	October 2019 to February 2021
Interpretation boards	Sept 2020 to March 2021

Access Improvements – Route enhancements



The intention was for the construction work associated with the shared green corridors to be implemented under the existing Balfour Beatty Framework Contract. Other options were considered but were discounted due to compliance issues, lack of partnership working, or the ability to deliver the programme within the funding period.

The works along each route were drawn from a standard list of prescriptions:

1. General description of the proposals creating new and improving existing green corridors.
2. Surfacing
3. Road crossings and terminations to routes
4. Signage and Waymarking

Five types of signage were installed along the routes:

- i. Temporary Wildlife Ways.
- ii. Wildlife Ways bollards.
- iii. Wildlife Ways directional signs.
- iv. Wildlife Ways interpretation boards.
- v. Highway signage - Type 956 or 967 signs.

Other hard landscape elements

To overcome specific issues identified on particular routes one-off works were envisaged as follows:

Route E – new Trief kerbing

Route F – new bridge parapet; the moving of road gullies; provision of a staggered pedestrian guardrail

Route G – new ACO drain kerbs; repositioning of pedestrian guardrails and central refuge island; removal of a height barrier; the removal of existing corduroy paving strips

Route I – On-carriageway ‘advisory cycle lane’ markings; removal of the central refuge in order to enable the creation of a new parallel crossing

Progress with Delivery of Wildlife Ways Green Corridors

The following expected outputs for habitat improvement along each route were proposed:

Route Breakdown	Improvement site (Not route name)	Area Planned Ha
A	Elmdon Park	0.26
B	Elmdon Park	0.0
C	Damson Parkway, Yew Tree, Hampton Ln, Damson Lane Pk, Wherrets Ln etc	0.77
D	Station Rd, Bickenhill Rd, Coleshill Heath Rd	0.46
E	Elmdon Ln, Coleshill Rd, Helmswood Drive, Berwick Ln	0.27
F	Marston Green (excl. grassland), Gloucester Way, Chapelhouse Rd	0.67
G	Forth Drive, Meriden Park, Chelmsley Road	1.58

Route Breakdown	Improvement site (Not route name)	Area Planned Ha
H	Babbs Mill	0.61
I	Hall Rd	0.53
J	Wagon Ln	0.08
K	Station Approach, Streetsbrook Rd	0.38
L	Monkspath Hall Rd, Tudor Grange Pk	1.17
N	Malvern Park	0.56
O	Green Lane	0.27
EXISTING ROUTES		
1	Water Orton Rd	0.8
2	Chester Rd	3.94
3	Auckland Drive	2.44
4	Moorland Avenue	2.13
5	Bickenhill Parkway	1.36
7	Lode Lane	2.66
8	Bickenhill Village	0.02
9	Hampton Ln	0.15
10	Glebe Road	0.22
11	Warwick Rd	0.26
12	Stratford Rd	1.15
13	Monkspath Hall Rd	1.08
	TOTAL	23.82

In March 2021 the total was revised to 24.91ha as a result of minor amendments.

The project reported percentage progress with the landscape works (carried out by Balfour Beatty and subcontractors) on a quarterly basis starting in Q3 2019.

Routes E and J were withdrawn from the programme. Work is in progress at all three outstanding sites. Once all other routes progressed had reached 100% completion in Q2 2021, no further updates to the table below were made.

Route	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021
L	>0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
A	>0%	<100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
I	0%	<100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
G	0%	>0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
B	0%	>0%	10%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
F	0%	0%	10%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
C (1)	0%	0%	2%	15%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
K	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
H	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%	50%	50%	100%
C (2)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%
D	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	30%	60%	80%	100%	100%

Route	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021
E	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
J	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
N	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%
O	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

As of March 2021 on the fifteen Green Routes, highways works had completed on 12 sites, with one 50% complete.

Highways works on the balance of 13 sites was completed by the end of June 2021.

Some concern was expressed that the highways and landscape contractors might have been better co-ordinated, to avoid soft landscaping taking place before highways works.

Wildlife Ways Habitat Improvement Sites

The project originally aimed to deliver 73 hectares of new or enhanced semi-natural habitat across a wide variety of areas including parks, open space, highway verges, wetlands, woodlands, and grasslands across the urban areas of the Borough. The council's management plan identified eleven different habitat interventions used to deliver a mosaic of enhancements.

The interventions can be divided into two broad groups, those which have been applied along the new and improved linear corridors (described below) and those applied to larger woodland, grassland, and wetland sites, each of which has a separate management plan and are reviewed in **Appendix 2**.

Delivery across the habitat improvement sites was essentially completed by mid-2022. The most notable outstanding actions were the installation of interpretation boards across these sites; however, this has now been completed.

All the habitat management sites were subject to detailed survey of species and habitats, backed up by soil surveys etc. as appropriate. These have been used to write new or update historic management plans for the next seven-years.

The level of survey and monitoring is exemplary. The management plans are well written and accessible with a focus on clearly illustrating the works to be carried out and their rationale. They could possibly benefit from a clear summary of the vision/aims/objectives for each site at the start of each plan that could be used as a standalone introduction in other contexts. The plans contain ample photographic evidence of the prior condition of each site and continue to be updated on an ongoing basis with further photographic records and monitoring information. This has facilitated the assessment of works done and their impact.

Approaches Taken

Grassland Restoration

The original approach to grassland restoration was to use the spreading of green hay from appropriate donor sites. Due largely to the drought conditions in summer 2019 the yield of seed from meadow sites was poor and as a result it became apparent that as a result this approach would not have the expected impact.

The response was to overseed each site with a seed mix appropriate to the local conditions. Choice of seed mix was facilitated by the investigations carried out in the preparation of each management plan. Our visits to the sites treated in this way suggest that this second approach has been largely successful.

We note that establishment of species in a mix has not been consistent between or even across larger individual sites. This disappointed the council who had hoped for a wider range of species straight away. There may always be species that do not take on a particular site due to small differences in local conditions or even the weather patterns following sowing. Our experience suggests that it can take several seasons for some species to become apparent due to delayed germination or simply because they have only established in very small numbers. This applies to both seed mixes and seeds from green hay, so we expect the grasslands to continue to increase in diversity over the next few years of management.

Because of the urban situation of these sites it is likely that few, if any, will be managed with aftermath grazing. This is not critical, and the most important issue will be to secure regular annual cut and bale of each site at an appropriate time of year. Ideally the timing can be influenced by weather and the state of the sward rather than the calendar.

Overall, the grassland restoration work appears to be having a significant positive impact and we look forward to seeing how it develops over the coming years.

Woodland Management

The main focus of woodland management has been on selective thinning; lack of such management is major issue for urban woodlands for several reasons – cost, the fact that decline due to lack of management is slow, and in some cases negative public perceptions.

Across the sites the degree of thinning work has varied considerably, with the most impactful work involving the removal of considerable amounts of timber. On a few sites we felt that the thinning could usefully have been more aggressive, however we are aware that there is a fine line to be walked with respect to community perception. If local sentiments are ignored this can create conflict that prevents further valuable work being done in the future.

It is important to record that all of the thinning work done has been worthwhile and appears to have significantly improved the structure of the woodlands managed, regardless of the scale of the works.

Work has included the removal of dense bramble and holly. The benefits of this will generally be fairly short term but should help the woods in progressing towards a more diversely structure.

Another significant element has been the removal of invasive species at a proportion of sites.

Linear Sites

The approaches taken for linear sites were:

Hedgerow planting with hedgerow wildflower edges

Hedges were either be single species or mixed, all species will be native; the choice of species was dependent on location, depth of verge and design criteria such as form and formality. Hedges were planted either double or triple staggered rows. Plants were protected from pests such as rabbits by spiral guards.

Where feasible a hedge margin of perennial wildflowers has been established using a variety of methods including changing the mowing regime and frequency, wildflower seed mixes, wildflower turf, bulbs and plug planting.

Street tree planting on existing/ new grass verges

Tree planting was used where the verges were small in order to form linear corridors where space is restricted. Tree species were selected to provide a number of benefits – native and native cultivars, tolerance of urban setting, seasonal interest and food sources for wildlife including pollinators.

Trees will be planted as Heavy Standards and Extra Heavy Standards.

Hedgerow with trees and hedgerow edge wildflowers

Hedges were planted as per approach 1. Trees planting within the hedgerows was at regular or irregular spacing dependent on the location and nature of the hedge and the design intention. Hedgerow trees were planted at Heavy Standards and Extra Heavy Standards, dependent on location.

Trees in species rich semi-improved grassland

This habitat enhancement was implemented where verges were of sufficient size to establish groups of trees in an improved grass area – typically close mown amenity grass. Linked canopies of a number of trees enable greater canopy cover and mass. Species were chosen to increase the Borough's species diversity and build in resilience in terms of climate change.

Trees were planted as Heavy Standards and Extra Heavy Standards. The planting spacing depends on the species, but the aim was that they will have shared canopies within 10 years.

The areas were previously mown on a performance specification where the grass was maintained at a height between 50–70mm; this changed to a reduced mowing frequency to enable species diversity to develop in the grass sward. The addition of early spring flowers (primroses, cowslips) and bulbs (crocus, muscari, wood anemone, snowdrops) helped with acceptance of the changes by residents and extends the period of interest for people, and for wildlife in terms of pollinating plants etc.

Low growth species-rich wildflower grassland

This intervention was used in areas adjacent to highways where traffic sightlines and forward visibility need to be maintained. Specialist advice was sought from SMBC Highways to determine appropriate areas for this intervention.

Low-growth vegetation was also be used where:

- access for vegetation control and landscape maintenance is difficult or costly due to temporary traffic control costs and
- to provide a transition between mown berms and high growing vegetation

The species mix was dominated by native plants chosen to establish a compact and closed sward which will help to reduce the need for weed management. Species were selected to provide a prolonged flowering season to deliver extended foraging opportunities for pollinating insects, whilst enhancing the visual amenity of the habitat.

Low growth wildflower habitats were created using either seeding or through the use of wildflower turf. Wildflower turves are relatively quick to establish and avoid the period of bare soil that occurs when establishing wildflower habitats from seed. Turves are the preferred intervention on steep banks where erosion of bare ground can prove problematic when seeding.

Street tree planting in hard surfacing

In order to establish trees within an urban or highway setting, some of them had to be planted within hard surfaced areas; this requires consideration of the planting method and ensuring that sufficient rooting volume is made available and with the appropriate growing medium provided.

Trees will be planted as semi-matures.

Pictorial wildflowers – in urban areas

Pictorial wildflowers compose both native and non-native species and are an effective method of establishing an idealised impressionistic meadow. The project used only perennial mixes, removing the need to re-cultivate and sow seed every year.

Due to their speed of establishment and reduced maintenance, turves were the preferred method of Pictorial wildflower establishment. When seeding was more appropriate, the ground was prepared by spraying out the existing vegetation and spreading mulch, no cultivation took place as this would encourage weed growth.

The habitat will be managed as other wildflower meadows through an end of season annual cut and collect.

Floristic ornamental planting – in urban areas

Ornamental planting was planted in beds/ areas adjacent to the green corridors. Plants were specified in 3 – 5 litre pots, with some larger plants as specimens.

Progress with Delivery of Landscape Sites

The project has reported progress with the landscape works (carried out by idverde) on a quarterly basis starting in Q2 2019.

Note that the seasonality of works means that most progress happened in Quarters 1 and 4 of each year. Once all sites progressed had reached 100% completion in Q2 2021, no further updates to the table below were made.

Route	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021
Route A – Elmdon Pk (and north of JLR)	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route B – Elmdon Pk	10%	10%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route C – Warwick/ New Roads Turf	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	15%	20%	95%	95%	100 %
Route D – Station Rd, Bickenhill Rd, Coleshill H. Rd	10%	10%	50%	75%	75%	95%	95%	95%	95%	100 %
Route E – Elmdon Rd, Coleshill Rd, Berwicks Ln/Helmans	60%	60%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route F – Gloucester Way & Marston Green POS	80%	80%	80%	85%	85%	90%	90%	95%	95%	100 %
Route G – Forth Drive & Meriden Pk (Kingshurst)	85%	85%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route H – Babbs Mill LNR	85%	85%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route I - Hall Rd	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route J – Wagon lane/Keswick road	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%	50%	50%	95%	95%	100 %
Route K – Streetsbrook Road	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	90%	95%	100 %	100 %
Route L – Tudor Grange Pk, Monkspath Hall Rd	0%	5%	5%	15%	70%	85%	85%	90%	95%	100 %
Route N - Malvern Park	75%	75%	75%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route O - Green Lane	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	100 %	100 %
Route 1 - Water Orton Rd	60%	60%	80%	90%	90%	95%	95%	95%	100 %	100 %
Route 2 - Chester Rd	5%	5%	60%	70%	80%	85%	95%	95%	100 %	100 %
Route 3 - Auckland Drive	0%	0%	50%	70%	80%	80%	90%	90%	95%	100 %
Route 4 - Moorend Ave. Pictorial turf ordered	0%	0%	50%	65%	70%	95%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Route 5 - Bickenhill Pkwy	0%	0%	20%	60%	60%	90%	95%	95%	95%	100 %
Route 7 - Lode Ln	0%	0%	40%	60%	70%	85%	85%	95%	95%	100 %

Route	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021
Route 8 - Catherine de Barnes Ln	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	100%
Route 9 - Hampton Ln	0%	0%	0%	35%	90%	90%	95%	95%	95%	100%
Route 10 - Glebe Rd	70%	70%	90%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	100%
Route 11 - Warwick Rd	0%	0%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Route 12 - Stratford Rd	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%	50%	60%	95%	100%	100%
Route 13 - Monkspath Hall Rd	0%	0%	0%	55%	60%	60%	65%	65%	75%	100%

In March 2021, when we carried out most of our comprehensive site visits, a total of 13 of the 24 landscape sites had been completed. Virtually all of the others were almost complete with only Monkspath Hall Road requiring significant further work.

Work on all the landscape sites was completed by June 2021.

Interpretation and Acknowledgement of ERDF Funding

Interpretation signs featuring acknowledgement of ERDF funding were installed across the corridors. See later in this report for example images.

Recording and Monitoring

Records for the management of each site are kept by the council, including photographic evidence of the work carried out.

Individual Routes

Our assessments of the work carried out on each route are given in **Final Report Appendix 1 - Wildlife Ways Green Routes**.

Wildlife Ways Habitat Management Sites

Summary details of each of the habitat management sites, are given in **Appendix 2**. This section records our overall assessment of the habitat management work.

Wildlife Ways – Woodland Management Sites

Eleven sites were originally selected for woodland habitat improvement as part of Wildlife Ways, with the aim of delivering 20.66ha of habitat improvements.

Site	Current Habitat	Size (Ha)
Elmdon Park	mature woodland	2.87
Damson Parkway (3 compartments)	mature woodland	5.13
Knightsbridge Woodland	mature woodland	2.16
Malvern / Brueton Park	plantation woodland	1.79
Coleshill Heath Road	mature woodland	1.69
Olton Jubilee Woodland LNR	mature woodland	1.77
Chelmsley Wood LNR	plantation wood	0.79
Babb's Mill LNR	plantation wood	2.16
Cole Bank Park LNR	plantation wood	0.67
Kinghurst Brook	plantation wood & tree planting	0.80
Marston Green Park LNR	plantation wood	0.83
Total (Ha)		20.66

Note: the areas given in this table (sourced from SMBC) are presumably original estimates and are not the figures given in the site management plans. The total achieved by mid-2021 was 23.2ha.

These woodlands were divided into two categories, broadleaved plantation woodlands and mature woodlands. Plantation woodlands are those that were planted by SMBC in the previous 15-30 years and have received very limited management during their lifetime. The mature woodlands are all semi-natural lowland mixed broadleaved woods and include large areas of ancient semi-natural woodland which are those with evidence of continuous wooded cover since 1600 AD.

In 2004 SMBC commissioned management plans for Council-owned mature woodlands. These Native Woodland Plans were used to inform the proposed general management prescriptions for the mature woodlands.

Updated management plans were produced for all sites.

Plantation Woodland

Over the previous 30 years SMBC undertook a number of woodland creation schemes across the borough. These sites have been planted with predominantly native broadleaved woodland. Most of the then 15 -30-year-old plantations have had little or no management since planting and are overdue thinning. This has resulted in the plantations becoming very dense and dark which has left them inaccessible to people and of restricted value to wildlife.

To enhance the ecological value of these even-aged plantation woodlands, a programme of thinning and coppicing has been undertaken. This opened up the canopy of selected areas of the plantations and created the necessary space to enable selected trees to progress to maturity thus creating greater structure within the woodland. Increased light penetration creates conditions that support a greater diversity of woodland flora. This diversification should enable many more species of birds, small

mammals, and insects to live in the woodlands and will make the sites significantly more visually attractive to site users.

Originally a field-layer was to be introduced to those areas where there is sufficient bare ground through seed scattering and planting. Due to Covid 19 progress with this was limited to bulb planting in a small number of woodlands.

Where the current mix of tree species was poor, trees were planted to diversify these areas. All seeds and trees were sourced, where possible from local provenance. Where feasible these were planted in conjunction with various volunteer groups and as part of community involvement events, however Covid 19 reduced the number of sites with such involvement.

Mature Woodland

Although Solihull's semi-natural woodlands have individual characteristics, they broadly correspond with two woodland types in the National Vegetation Classification, (Rodwell, 1991) namely W8, – maple – dog's mercury woodland and W10, oak – bracken – bramble woodland.

Much of the mature plantation woodland of relatively recent origin affected by the project does not sit comfortably in these categories.

Thinning

The majority of the mature woodlands have not been coppiced in recent history and will continue to be managed primarily as high forest. The canopies, in general, are very even-aged. The age diversity and structure should be improved, using natural regeneration encouraged by selective thinning. The extent of such work was determined by the density and age structure of the existing canopy and the extent of advanced regeneration.

Coppicing

Where appropriate, the project seeks to establish or re-establish coppice management systems on a coupe rotation basis in order to increase the biodiversity of the woodlands and produce coppice products.

Glades & Ride Management

Recreation/creation of rides with an irregular scalloped edge has been used to allow greater light penetration and vary the habitat diversity and structure. Internal glades and rides provide valuable habitat for a wide range of wildlife, much of which differs from the high forest areas.

Deadwood

Existing deadwood, both fallen and standing, has been retained and protected. Some native trees were retained to provide for future veteran trees and deadwood habitats. Some felled material has been left on site to create deadwood piles of value to invertebrates. Management of dead-wood was done with public safety in mind. Standing dead trees were not retained within falling distance of paths or rides.

Non-native trees and shrubs

Non-native tree and shrub species including sycamore, cotoneasters, cherry laurel, rhododendron and snowberry were reduced and eradicated where possible. Control was implemented through a combination of hand weeding and the application of herbicide as a cut stump treatment.

Expansion of woodlands

Where it is appropriate, woodland areas were extended through the planting of native, broadleaved species that are consistent with the existing NVC community and characteristic of the local landscape.

General principles

All tree removals were completed outside the bird nesting season March – September inclusive.

Any trees to be removed were surveyed for the presence of bats, prior to work commencing.

Interpretation and Acknowledgement of ERDF Funding

Between 2021 and 2023 interpretation boards were installed identifying the ERDF project along with species and habitats specific to each site. During site visits we observed many of these boards already in position.

Recording and Monitoring

Records of the management of each site are kept in the management plans, including photographic evidence of the work being carried out.

In 2018 woodland condition monitoring was undertaken by SMBC's ecologists. The methodology was devised by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and adapted from the standardised methodology created by Natural England for condition monitoring assessments of SSSIs. Surveys were repeated in 2021 when the data will be analysed to establish the ecological impacts of the work. Surveys will then continue every two years to monitor the condition of the woodland, with the next surveys due in 2023.

The notes for each site (see appendices) record how the various options from the general management outlined above were applied on each site.

Wildlife Ways – Grassland Management Sites

Nine sites were originally selected for grassland habitat improvement as part of Wildlife Ways. These were:

Site	Current Habitat	Size (Ha)
Hillfield Park LNR	amenity & semi-improved grassland	2.23
Elmdon Park	semi-improved grassland	3.42
Malvern Park	semi-improved grassland	0.3
Streetsbrook Public Open Space	amenity grassland	3.43
Babbs Mill LNR	amenity & semi-improved grassland	3.46
Brueton Park LNR	semi-improved grassland	10.35
Kinghurst Brook	amenity grassland	3.63
Low Brook	amenity grassland	0.77
Chelmsley Wood	amenity grassland	0.52
Total (Ha)		28.63

As the project developed Malvern Park was removed from the list and Chelmsley Wood was renamed as Cole Bank Park Local Nature Reserve; the final list is:

1. Babbs Mill Local Nature Reserve
2. Brueton Park Local Nature Reserve
3. Cole Bank Park Local Nature Reserve
4. Elmdon Park
5. Hillfield Park LNR
6. Kinghurst Brook and Low Brook Grasslands
7. Marston Green Park LNR
8. Streetsbrook Road Public Open Space

Pre-Management Survey

Soil and ecological surveys were undertaken at each site to assess the suitability for grassland improvement and to help choose suitable donor sites and seed mixes. This also provides baseline information on site conditions including photographs, and the results are recorded in the management plans.

The sites chosen were all of limited ecological value. Their previous management fell into three groups:

- Close mown amenity grassland.
- Meadows of relatively low diversity usually cut late without the hay being removed.
- Former amenity grassland which had been allowed to grow long in 2018.

Grassland Methodology

Subject to some variation in timing, a similar process was followed for each site:

Any essential preparation works, such as access improvements, were put in hand ahead of the management work.

The most fertile areas of grassland were allowed to grow uncut (from either 2018 or 2019), then it was cut and baled in summer 2019. The more fertile areas were then sprayed with glyphosate herbicide to kill the sward. Less fertile/ecologically suitable areas were not subject to herbicide treatment.

This was then followed by combi harrowing in two directions to break up the surface.

In August a forage harvester was used to take a crop of green hay from a suitable nearby species-rich hay meadow. This would consist of wildflowers and grasses just as they were shedding seed and still 'green'. The harvested green hay was blown directly into a trailed rear discharge manure spreader and then immediately transferred to the site where it was spread.

The 2018 hay spreading at Babbs Mill appears to have been successful, but the hay crops taken in 2019 were consistently poor (probably because of the very dry summer) and as a result germination was poor across all the receptor sites.

As a result, the sites were scarified in early spring 2020 and overseeded with commercial meadow seed mixes chosen to match the local conditions and then rolled. This overseeding appears to have been generally successful.

In late summer, the now overseeded meadows were cut, the hay allowed to dry and drop seed, and baled.

Due to the constraints of the urban location of the meadows, no attempts were made to introduce aftermath grazing. Instead, a second cut and collect in October will be undertaken when practical to further reduce fertility.

It is proposed that this annual management of a late summer and autumn cut and collect will be continued for all sites, however, acknowledgement is given that in the future, financial or other constraints may mean the autumn cut is omitted.

On several sites it is intended that efforts should be made to leave uncut approximately 10% of the meadows as unmown strips along the edges of fields to provide a food resource for insects, especially butterflies and bumblebees, on an annual rotation.

Green Hay

Used to enhance existing species-poor semi-improved grassland. Green hay is taken from a species-rich donor site and spread on a species-poor recipient site, is an effective method of restoring and enhancing wildflower grasslands. Green hay is harvested wildflowers and grasses just as they are shedding seed and still 'green'. The hay is quickly transferred to the species-poor recipient site where it is spread allowing the seed to drop. Prior to application of green hay, the recipient sites are prepared by mowing and removing of arisings followed by scarification using either a chain or disc harrow.

A major issue face by the project was that 2019 was a drought year and the yield of wildflower seed in green hay was very low, leading to poor establishment. To remedy this the sites treated with green hay were scarified and over sown with wildflower seed in early 2020 as described below.

Several stakeholders noted that the relatively slow establishment of seeded grasslands made the benefits of such initiatives more difficult to communicate to the public at first, although by the second season when results became more visible this could be overcome.

Interpretation and Acknowledgement of ERDF Funding

Interpretation, including acknowledgment of ERDF funding was rolled out across the grassland sites during the period covered by our visits.

Recording and Monitoring

Records for the management of each site are kept in the management plans, including photographic evidence of the work being carried out.

There is clear evidence that the procedures followed for each site were adapted to reflect local conditions, for example by the choice of seed mixture. At one site (Babbs Mill) these areas were spread with dredgings, applied so that less fertile subsoil would be on top.

Condition monitoring was initiated in 2018, repeated in 2021 and then carried out every two years.

The notes for each site in the appendices record any significant deviations from the general management outlined above.

GBSLEP Small Habitats Grants Programme

By running the ERDF Small Habitats Grants Programme the Council aimed to enable a greener GBSLEP. The Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Economic Partnership (GBSLEP) is made up of the following local authority areas: Birmingham, Solihull, Cannock, East Staffs, Lichfield, Tamworth, Wyre Forest, Redditch and Bromsgrove.

Through the programme eligible organisations from across the GBSLEP area were able to deliver green and blue infrastructure improvements at a smaller scale.

The programme originally aimed to deliver 20 Hectares of habitat improvement across the GBSLEP. The target increased when project change request 4 was approved to 37 hectares in addition to the timescale for delivery being extended from September 2022 to an activity end date of April 2023 with the financial completion of June 2023, with the final claim submitted July 2023. The value of the grant element of GTG increased to £3.54m.

Eligibility

To apply for a grant from the Habitats Grants Programme organisations had to be one of the following:

- Charity
- Statutory organisation
- Not-for-profit organisation
- Community or voluntary organisation
- Parish or Town Council
- Business – if the land is open to public all year round
- Schools – if the land is open to public all year round

The following were specifically not eligible:

- Farms
- Individuals
- Schools (if the land isn't wholly open to the public all year round)

To be eligible for a grant the land that the project is improving should be located in the GBSLEP (Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership) area, although the organisation can be based elsewhere.

Application Rounds

The fund has rounds every two months, with the first deadline being September 2019, until all the fund is allocated. In order to try and attract more bids SMBC had rolling open calls in late 2021 and 2022.

Additional resources were secured, and the fund remained open until October 2022, with seventeen rounds of bids.

Bids were evaluated by the Small Habitats Grants Decision Making Panel soon after each closing date. Applicants were told how their applications are progressing. In many cases applicants were required to produce additional information or evidence in support of their application.

The Council maintains a comprehensive record of responses to each call for applications, which is too large and complex to include in this report, but which evidences the diligence applied to the grant administration process.

Successful Applications

As of December 2022, 16 successful applications had been made and projects started, with a total funding allocation of £2,745,394.50.

Site Name	Organisation	Funding Allocated	Target (ha)	Achieved (ha)	Status
Tucklesholme Quarry	Staffordshire Wildlife Trust	£63,390	11.5	11.5	Complete
Bees and Trees	SMBC	£391,171	23.85	15.94 so far	Extended. Awaiting management plan.
Langley Hall Park Pond Restoration	SMBC	£60,000	0.25	0.25	Awaits sign off
Cherry Holme	Staffordshire Wildlife Trust	£58,000	8.8	8.85	Complete
LYRIC	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust	£89,706	8.14	8.3	Complete
Bleakhouse	Staffordshire Wildlife Trust	£55,689	110	110	Complete
Hatchford Brook Biodiversity Project	The Trent Rivers Trust	£63,000	2.1		Awaits sign off
Damsels and Dragons	SMBC	£100,000	2.8	2.8	Interpretation boards outstanding
Arrow Valley	Redditch Borough Council	£76,788	4.5		Underway 22/02/2023
Blythe Revival	Warwickshire Wildlife Trust	£79,136	2		Awaiting management plan.
Frogs and Logs	SMBC	£489,516	1.57		Possible extension.
Newts and Shoots	SMBC	£279,798	5.265		Possible extension.
Alderbrook Enhancements	SMBC	£66,667	0.075		Awaits sign off
Cannock Ext Canal	Canal River Trust	£500,000	6.3		Complete
Hedges & Sedges	SMBC	£269,534	5.79		Complete
Darnford Moors Habitat Improvements	Lichfield and Hatherton Canal Restoration Trust	£103,000	2		Awaits sign off
TOTALS		£2,745,395	194.94	141.70	

Figures in the above table refer to the total project value not the ERDF grant amount, and the area of habitat to be improved in conservation status not total site area. Note that several projects were expanded and saw changes in grant value and the number of outputs delivered, figures here are as of end February 2023.

Most projects had completed delivery by the end of February 2022, however some had not yet been signed off as complete as they were awaiting final approval of the management plan. Some of the

The two projects with significant works outstanding are the Darnford Moors Habitat improvements, which has so far had its first claim signed off, and the Arrow Valley weir removal project which was considerably downsized (from three weirs to one weir) following an approved PCR by the SHG Board. The works commenced on 22 February 2023, but should be completed during March 2023.

Progress with Outputs

The small habitats grant scheme has exceeded its target for habitat improvement and delivered across a wide range of habitats (see **Appendix 3**).

The revised contracted target for the Small Habitats Grants is 37ha. The projected total delivery is 195ha.

Current delivery stands at 142ha out of this 195ha total; however, the apparent shortfall is largely due to projects awaiting final sign off rather than delays with implementation. The two projects that remain in full delivery phase are (Arrow Valley and Darnford Moors) which account for 6.5ha) and these are still expected to deliver all or most of their targets.

Unfortunately the range of delivery partners was not what had been aspired to despite the Council running many rounds of applications and making sterling efforts to promote the grants. It seems that the main difficulty was for applicants in securing match funding; a particular issue was the intervention rate of 40% meant that most projects required at least two other sources of match funding to make up the 60% (as most sources are limited to 50%).

The Grant Scheme has been efficiently administered with care being taken to ensure that all approved applications were compliant with ERDF requirements. A good level of support has been provided to applicants, and this has helped ensure that they have been able to achieve delivery and compliance despite the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The grant scheme projects approved before 2021 were mostly completed by 2022, although the Bees and Trees project was extended using underspend.

As of February 2023, the Arrow Valley and Darnford Moors projects are the only elements of the whole project that still have materially outstanding elements to complete. Solihull Council are confident that the Arrow Valley will be able to achieve completion during March 2023 and the Darnford Moors project by early April.

Details of the Small Habitats Grant projects, including assessments of progress are given in **Appendix 3 - GBSLEP Small Habitats Grant Scheme Sites**.

Despite efforts to deliver additional outputs to make use of underspend, the Small Habitats Grant Scheme has already delivered nearly four times its re-profiled output target for habitat improvements, and the final delivery should be over five times the contracted target.

There were challenges in getting in good applications, however, the value of transitional funding was £781,000 and the Council approved 5 projects, underspending by only £981. One suggestion for future schemes is to lower the minimum grant amount for these areas to make it easier for applicants to access match funding.

Solihull Council are working closely with grant recipients to ensure they meet their deadline as outlined in their funding agreements. This is to ensure all expenditure has been spent and claimed as well as ensuring all outputs/KPI's have been achieved.

Delivery and Management

This has been a very large and complex project, with dozens of sub-projects that would require significant management and planning input as standalone initiatives.

Considerable benefit was accrued to the overall programme by the retention of skilled staff dedicated to certain aspects of the project, or in some cases the use of specialists consultants where recruitment of suitable individuals was not practical or possible.

Examples of how this has worked well include:

- Establishment of a project board with a good range of stakeholders from different backgrounds.
- Ensuring sufficient skills and capacity for detailed survey, management planning and monitoring of the ecological/habitat works.
- Achieving uniformity of design and approach for the green routes through a single office.
- Dedicated capacity for community and educational engagement.
- A grant manager for the small habitats grant scheme able to provide in-depth support and liaison for applicants.

Specific mention must be made of the way that the project has managed to keep on track despite the significant impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and subsequent restrictions. These have required all partners and members of the project delivery team, including subcontractors to adopt new and unfamiliar precautions and ways of working.

Towards the end of the project particular challenges arose for Solihull Council with some of the Small Habitats Grant projects, particularly those delivered by the various external partners. This created major challenges in supporting these partners to be able to achieve delivery within the project timescale.

As might be expected on a project of this scale there have been some minor issues. Some tender specification issues had to be addressed and there was some feedback that a wider understanding of ERDF rules and regulation would have been useful.

The Council also took on additional delivery challenges in order to achieve further outputs using underspend that became available. This appears to have gone well, partly due to experience gained from earlier project delivery.

Management of the project has been successful, particularly with regards to developing co-operation and co-ordination across such a geographically and practically wide-ranging set of activities. The achievement of keeping such a large and complex project on track through the pandemic and beyond is testament to the professionalism of all involved.

The use of a relevant steering group, communications with elected members and the employment of dedicated project staff all seem to have helped facilitate project delivery.

Steering groups

Two steering groups for the project were established, with some crossover of membership, first meeting in July 2018 and monthly thereafter.

There was representation from highways, landscapes, finance, project assurance team, wildlife trust and environment agency.

The involvement of the Environment Agency (EA) and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) as strategic partners was recognised by stakeholders as providing 'a wealth of experience and support'.

Co-operation on the project has strengthened working relationships between the project partners.

Small Habitats Grants Decision Board

The launch event for the Small Habitats Grant programme took place on 17th July in Birmingham. The Expression of Interest form was advertised across the GBSLEP area on both the Solihull Council website and the GBSLEP website for organisations to apply to. The closing date for the first round of applications was 30th September and was oversubscribed.

The small grants team supported applicants through the EOI stage with any queries and questions in regards to their applications.

Applications were received from local authorities, wildlife trust, higher education sector and parish councils. Applications were checked by the assurance and compliance team and also the Ecology team with clarifications sent back to applicants.

The Small Habitats Grants Decision Board first met on 8th October 2018. It included members of the GBSLEP area, Environment Agency and Wildlife Trust and evaluates the applications and decides who will be invited to full application. The Terms of Reference reflect those of the ESIF Sub Committee.

In total the SHG Decision Board oversaw seventeen rounds of the scheme and dealt with applications totalling over £3.5m (Total grant allocation). Unfortunately, some of these applications did not progress to delivery stage although were allocated funding due to match funding or issues around accessibility to sites.

Project Finance

A significant proportion of project funding has been sourced from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), originally 50% of £14.2m eligible expenditure out of £16.5m total cost. Following a project change request the ERDF programme element has increased to £15.3m for a revised total cost of £17.6m. This change also saw the project end date shifted from 31/12/2022 to 30/06/2023.

Other sources of funding are the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF), the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC).

The maximum intervention rate for all aspects of the project was 50.00%.

Figures as originally approved:

	ERDF (a) (£)	Public Match (b) (£)	Private Match (c) (£)	Total (d) (£)	Intervention rate (%) (a)/(d) x 100	Total public funding (%) (a+b)/d 100
Capital	£6,377,797	£6,377,797	£0	£12,755,595	50%	100%
Revenue	£725,198	£725,197	£0	£1,450,394	50%	100%
TOTAL	£7,102,996	£7,102,996		£14,205,989	50%	100%

Figures as approved as of final PCR 2021:

	ERDF (a) (£)	Public Match (b) (£)	Private Match (c) (£)	Total (d) (£)	Intervention rate (%) (a)/(d) x 100	Total public funding (%) (a+b)/d 100
Capital	£6,631,520	£6,631,520	£0	£13,263,039	50%	100%
Revenue	£1,028,218	£1,028,218	£0	£2,056,437	50%	100%
TOTAL	£7,659,738	£7,659,738	£0	£15,319,476	50%	100%

Project spend as of March 2023:

	ERDF (a) (£)	Public Match (b) (£)	Private Match (c) (£)	Total (d) (£)	Intervention rate (%) (a)/(d) x 100	Total public funding (%) (a+b)/d 100
Capital	£5,529,432	£ 5,529,432	£0	£11,058,864	50%	100%
Revenue	£859,664	£859,664	£0	£1,719,328	50%	100%
TOTAL	£6,389,096	£6,389,096	£0	£12,778,192	50%	100%

Project Spend Profile

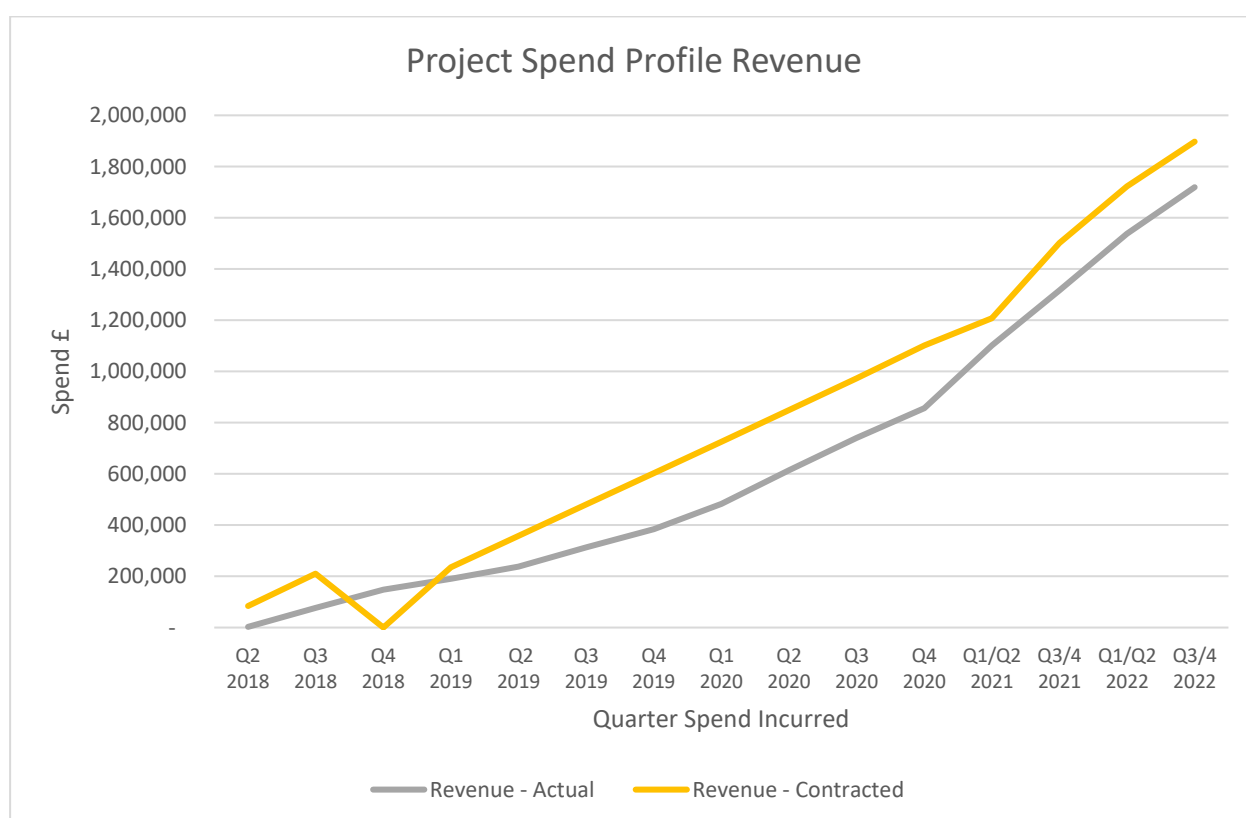
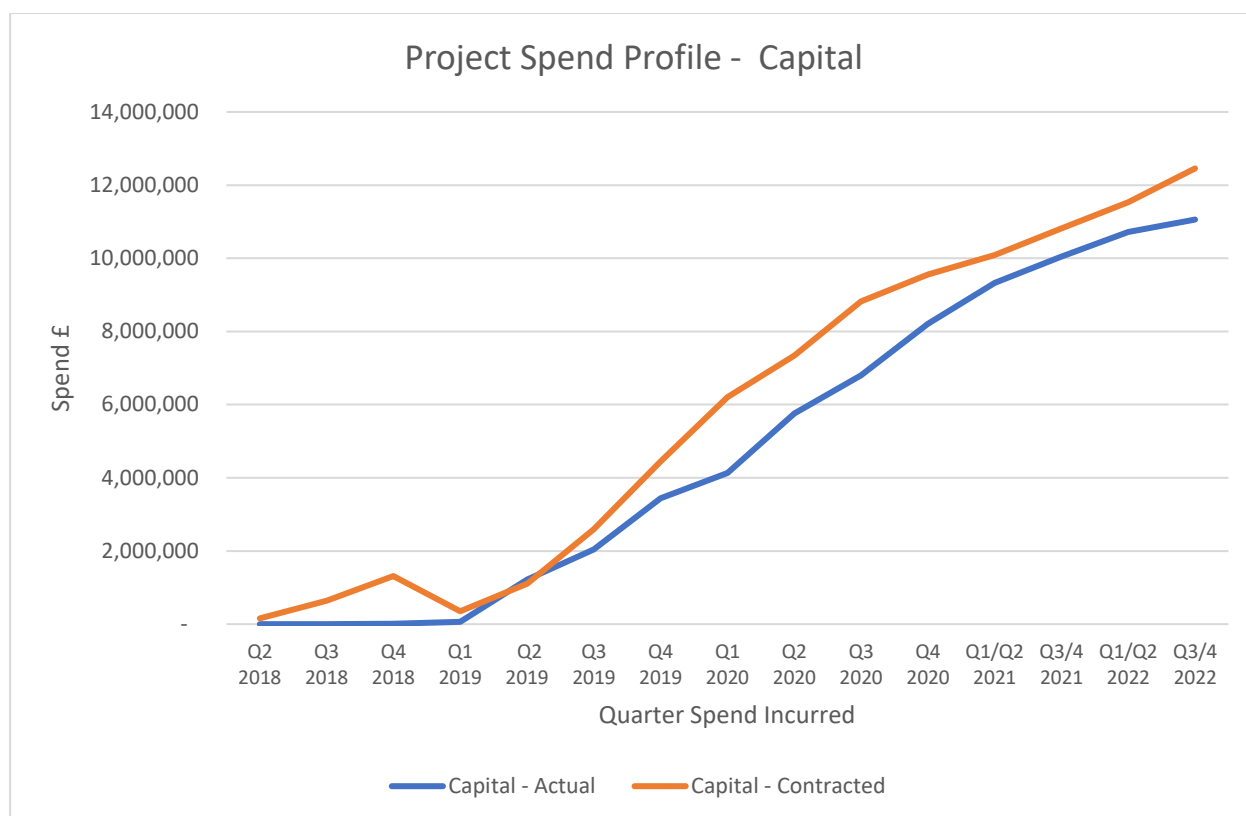
We have used the quarterly figures reported to MHCLG. It has proven somewhat problematic to consistently track the project spend against its forecast spend profile, as the latter has been re-forecast over the life of the project.

In the first year of the project spend on capital works was minimal and spend on revenue was well below projections.

Once the Wildlife Ways elements were more or less complete in early 2021 the rate of capital; spend decreased significantly reflecting mostly the Small Habitats Grant Scheme. The opposite was seen with revenue spend as the SHG projects had a significant administrative support requirement.

The spend profile was reforecast more realistically at the start of 2019. Rather than use the regular reforecasts after this point (which would naturally make the spend track the forecast very closely) we have decided to compare actual spend against the following forecast profile:

- The original forecasts up to end 2018; this reflects the delays associated with getting a large and complex project up and running.
- The revised forecasts as of Q1 2019; from this point the project had moved fully into its delivery phase.



Note that the grant claim £36,992 for Q3 2018 was not made (a nil claim was submitted), so the figures for Q4 2018 includes expenditure for Q3.

Overall, the project spend has consistently been below target, partially reflecting delays in implementation discussed elsewhere but also reflecting that SMBC were initially claiming the Small Habitats Grant monies from MHCLG and then paying the grant recipients.

The Council were advised by MHCLG the process should be to pay the grant recipients and then claim. As a result, the projects are still in delivery stage and majority of the funding has been allocated. Once projects have submitted their invoices, defrayal evidence, outputs etc., the Council will pay claims on submission of a management plan and output checks by their landscape team. Several claims were submitted in Q1 2023 and will be processed soon with the remainder of claims being closely monitored with the expectation of completion and payment in Q2 2023.

These final rounds of expenditure are expected to significantly reduce overall underspend by the end of the project.

Tender Management

Highways used the ERDF compliant SCAPE framework. Balfour Beatty were appointed as the main contractor for the Green Route works.

For the landscape works KPI/ biodiversity outputs have been written into the Tender requirements and the weighting on programme was given considerable emphasis as advised by procurement - 30%. Overall Quality weighting was 60% (compared to Price 40%). Due to the size and complexity of the tender the deadline was extended. The winning contractors (from three submissions) were idverde, who were appointed in December 2018.

We understand an irregularity was not identified on the request for quotation document for funding from MHCLG. This resulted in a 5% clawback on all idverde invoices. The Council state that internal processes have been updated to increase the number of checks in place so that there is no repeat.

The council recognise that it is important that procurement, internal audit/monitoring and the project office all review and sign off the documents to reduce the chances of the repetition of issues.

Habitat management work was subject to a separate open tender process to the same requirements.

Stakeholder feedback suggested that employing a Quantity Surveyor (QS) during the design phase could have ensured that costs were better accounted for and that the designs were appropriate. They stated there were some items missed off the original bill of quantities which may have been identified by a QS.

Resourcefulness and flexibility of behalf of the subcontractors was felt to be a contributory factor to the success of delivery under difficult circumstances of Covid-19. A number of stakeholders commented that idverde had been particularly responsive to the council's needs.

Staff

The following ERDF funded posts were recruited to support the project:

- Project Manager Landscape Architect
- ERDF Monitoring Officer
- Project Manager Highways Engineer
- Engagement Officer
- Small Grants Officer
- Ecologist

Following a number of advisements for the Ecologist role and several interviews, no suitable candidates were identified. As a result, the council appointed a consultant that is eligible under ERDF.

The following posts turned over during the project and had to be re-recruited:

- ERDF Monitoring Officer (November 2018)
- Project Manager Highways Engineer (December 2018)

After two failed attempts at recruiting a replacement, the Highways team have explored other routes and hired a consultant funded outside of ERDF.

The importance of this support was acknowledged multiple times in stakeholder feedback.

Communications

A comprehensive communications plan was drawn up and agreed with the SMBC communications team. This was updated on a weekly basis and informs target audiences such as councillors and residents of planned works etc.

- Elected members were briefed via their weekly email update before works were due to start in their wards
- For each route, prior to works starting, residents and interested local stakeholders were contacted by letter or email and encouraged to sign up to the Council's "Stay Connected" digital communication format to provide regular updates
- The Council's Connect service was provided with a 'script' to enable their staff to field routine enquiries concerning Greening the Grey Wildlife Ways.
- An ERDF funded engagement officer was appointed to lead on liaison with the public and local stakeholders.

The following table summarising communications actions was provided to us by the project's Engagement Officer:

Task	Action
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agreement with designers and hosts Diva signed October 2018 ▪ Hosted for three years – December 2018-December 2022 ▪ 30 hours maintenance time included – split as 10 hours over three years, requests made to Diva to do detailed back-end work and time taken deducted accordingly and estimated in advance; an online tracker shows what is left, what has been used and why ▪ Site content covers project descriptions, aims and objectives; latest news; plans and resources (maps, traffic diversions and newsletters); area-by-area (based on Solihull MBC electoral wards) descriptions of what is happening when including videos, images and plans; frequently asked questions; partners and contact forms ▪ Site and contract managed by Engagement Officer; Communications Officer and Programme Co-ordinator also have access ▪ Following the end of the contract in December 2022, the site will be closed and some of its content transferred to the Solihull MBC website. A historic copy of the site will be retained for reference purposes ▪ Traffic has been monitored through Google Analytics – trends through 2020 attached
Communications Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ An overall Communications Plan for Wildlife Ways was produced in November 2018 by the Communications Officer ▪ This was supplemented by a series of individual Communications Plans for each route ▪ Plans were also produced for specific complex or sensitive activities where required, e.g. removals of trees on routes
Newsletters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A monthly newsletter has been produced under the Solihull MBC 'Stay Connected' banner since February 2019 (with the exception of March and April 2020, due to Covid) ▪ The content is usually updates on works on various routes or news items, such as interviews with project managers

Task	Action
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of February 2021 the newsletter had 1,032 subscribers
Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A dedicated email inbox, wildlifeways@solihull.gov.uk was set up to channel comments, complaints and questions This was managed by the Engagement Officer with the Programme Co-ordinator, Communications Officer and Head of Highways Infrastructure also having access People can send in messages to this address via the Wildlife Ways website Messages regarding the project were also forwarded via Solihull Connect, the highways and landscape teams The process followed was that any emails would be forwarded to the appropriate department / officer to reply to either direct (usually if a councillor or MP was asking) or via the WW email. This would be done in a five-day turnaround timeframe with an auto-reply to each person who emails to say so This address is being wound down from March 2021 with enquiries to be channelled via Solihull Connect
Collateral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Series of banners produced installed at publicly visible sites on each route during works; this was mostly restricted to footpath resurfacing and widening areas Poster template produced by Communications' graphic designer allows smaller laminated posters to be installed where specialist landscape works (e.g. woodland management or tree removals) are taking place The 'Story so Far' is an infographic poster produced by Communications featuring project milestone statistics (e.g. sqm of wildflower turf laid to date). This has been installed in the council house and been made available online. It has been updated three times to date Pull-up banners used at exhibitions and events
Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rather than have a dedicated WW social media presence it was decided to use existing council channels. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the content. Examples of social media replies have been attached.
Political Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We had regular email and phone contact with ward councillors and established some key relationships, especially around Elmdon Park and Chelmsley Wood Cabinet and ward councillors received email briefings with plans of works included, copies of residents' letters and offers of on-site briefings We offered in these emails site meetings to the cabinet and ward councillors that took place before start of works. These would see the members walked along the routes to be developed with highways, landscape and programme managers informing them of the scope of works, answering questions and noting specific local issues and requests

Task	Action
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MPs occasionally emailed us with issues raised by constituents which we would formally reply to Councillors were also offered the opportunity to take part in photocalls. Two full council marketplace events took place (see Events)
Public Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The WW email inbox was the key line of enquiry for members of the public Queries also came in via Solihull Connect, highways and landscape teams, Neighbourhood Officers (emails and phone calls) Letter drops were made to all properties in the immediate vicinity of the works. Following a review of resources and capacity the mailing was outsourced to a specialist company who sent the letters from a list of addresses and postcodes provided Events to engage with the public were also held (see 'Events' entry) Where there were disputes (Water Orton Road, Elmdon Park) meetings between officers and community representatives took place to find common ground or to resolve
General Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A log has been kept of interactions between myself and the public, politicians, community groups and businesses (I cannot share this for GDPR reasons) There were approx. 280 public queries between February 2019-21 There were also some 120 political queries
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I attended parish council meetings (Marston Green, Hampton in Arden, Kingshurst) and met in person other local groups such as Balsall Common Residents' Association, Cars Area Action Group (Smiths Wood), B37 (Chelmsley Wood) and Elmdon Park Support Group I kept regular conversations going after lockdown, via email, phone and online
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We attended two events in 2019 – Fun in the Park (September) and Oaks and Shires (October) Scheduled events for 2020 were cancelled We attended full council marketplace with a stand in October and December 2019 We ran a series of bulb planting events with local schools in autumn 2019. These were publicised on social media. We also joined a community organiser for bulb planting in December 2019

The role of communications officer ended with the material completion of the Wildlife Ways element of the project, as most of the communications around the Small Habitats Grants were dealt with by grant recipients.

Importance of Communications

A number of stakeholders stressed the value of communications with the public and suggested that greater emphasis on consultation and awareness raising before implementation of the project could have helped prevent opposition and misunderstandings.

However, it was found that once communities expressing reservations were engaged, the great majority of their concerns were addressed, and disputes resolved positively.

There were suggestions that limiting points of communication could have helped reduce complaints.

Examples of Communications

The following images give examples of different communications routes used by the project and demonstrate the acknowledgement of ERDF funding.



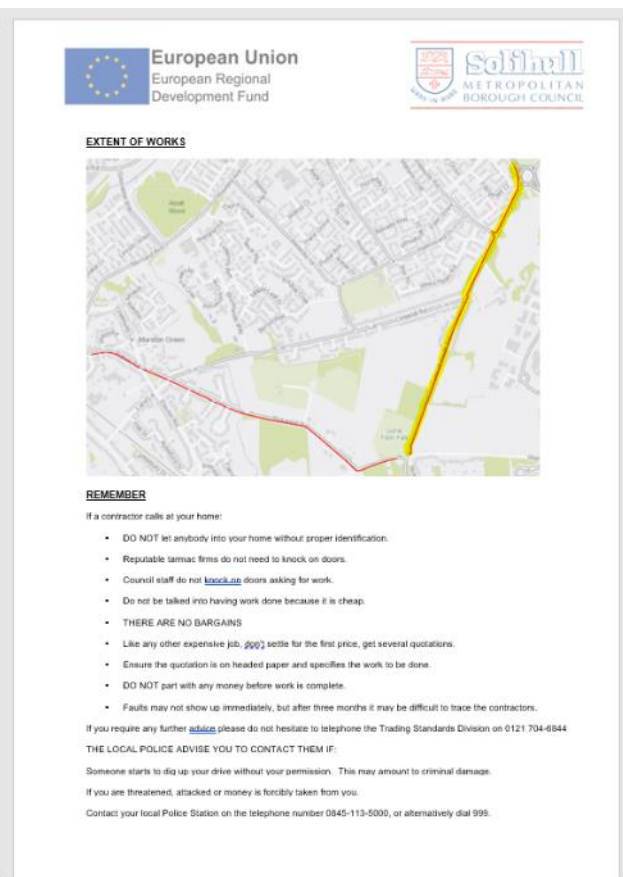




Figure 1 - Project attendance at events.

Publicity

Publicity activity has included:

- Internal weekly comms meeting to ensure timely messaging to residents and Members
- Member's briefings to councillors in the run up to the works commencing
- Briefings to ward councillors for each of the specific wards affected by the works
- Letter drops to local residents around the work sites to inform them of the up-coming work
- Parish councils and local residents and friends of groups informed where relevant
- Temporary closure notices and signs displayed on fencing around the sites to inform visitors of the works.
- Temporary Wildlife Ways 'lollipop signs' during works.
- Interpretive signage across all sites.
- A requirement for Small Habitats Grant recipients to use appropriate signage on site too acknowledge funding.

Signage

We were able to observe many examples of signage across different project sites. There was clear acknowledgement made of ERDF funding with appropriate use of the logo.



Figure 2 - Examples of temporary signage with ERDF logo.



Figure 3 - Examples of signage at various projects sites.

Small Habitats Grant Signage

During site visits we discovered that some SHG recipients were not properly aware of the need to acknowledge funding on site (although it was clearly expressed in the grant conditions and PIV meeting). This issue was raised with the Council who ensured that recipients were made aware, and checks were made as part of final compliance visits.

The following photographs show evidence of signage with the ERDF logo installed by the Canal and River Trust for their project at the Cannock Extension Canal.



The signage below is at the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust's project at Tuckleholme Quarry:



Ecological Monitoring

The Council has taken a conscientious and detailed approach to monitoring and evaluation that goes beyond that normally implemented during the delivery of ERDF funded projects. Comprehensive biodiversity surveys were undertaken of all sites before work was carried out in order to identify features of interest were protected and complemented and ensure that optimal methodologies were employed.

This was followed by post completion surveys, mostly in 2021, which will be further repeated in 2023 and then at two-yearly intervals. The findings of the surveys are recorded in the comprehensive management plans (see below) produced for each of the sites where habitat improvements have been carried out.

The results of monitoring have been put into a detailed spreadsheet and this can be used to generate other summary spreadsheets. The council has used various spreadsheets to provide us with detailed information on delivery across the various project initiatives and sites, this has greatly facilitated our understanding of the project's delivery and given us a high level of confidence in the figures for delivery. Stakeholders external to the Council who have received Small Habitats Grants have undertaken their own monitoring, but additional monitoring visits have been undertaken by the Council in order to confirm compliance in delivering outputs etc.

The level of monitoring invested in the project reflects Solihull Council's commitment to achieving a very high standard in its biodiversity projects and their delivery and can be seen as exemplary. While the project's ecological and output monitoring is an example of best practice, we hesitate to suggest that all other projects should aspire to achieving this level of monitoring. Firstly, the level of monitoring achieved goes well beyond that required for compliance monitoring. Secondly, most other organisations delivering similar projects will struggle to make and maintain this level of input due to a lack of both skills and human resources.

Project	Site	Woodland (ha)	Grassland (ha)	Wetland (ha)	Wetland (L/M)	No. Trees & Shrubs	Hedgerow L/M	m ² wildflower turf	No. Plants	Surfaced paths (L/M)	Footbridges	Gates	Interpretation Signage	Mgmt. Plan	Monitoring	Permit/Licence (EA/FC)	Site clean up	Fencing L/M	Boardwalks / Steps	Drop Bollards	Other Ecological Enhancements (e.g. Bat and Bird Boxes)	Project Cost
Solihull Habitats & Nature Improvement Project	Bulls Wood LNR	6.6				400				300	13	1	1	1	1	1	1					£1,893,000
	Yorks Wood LNR	9.96							500				1	1	1	1	1					
	Alcott Wood LNR	6.08				250							1	1	1	1	1					
	Dorridge Wood LNR	4.99	4.51			1568				800		2	2	1	1	1	1					
	Pow Grove	0.88				80				40				1	1	1	1					
	Smiths Wood LNR	4.49											1	1	1	1	1					
	Wychwood	1.74								30			1	1	1	1	1					
	Colebrook Rec / Aqueduct Rd		1.25									1	1	1	1	1						
	Dickens Heath CP LNR	.4											1	1	1	1						
	Beechcroft LNR & POS		7.34										1	1	1	1				2		
	Low Brook		0.51	0.2	250								1	1	2							
	Cole Bank Park LNR	0.67	1.94			50							1	3	3	1	1					
	Palmer's Rough LNR	7.95						700		250	2		1	1	1	1	1					
	Hillfield Park LNR	7.69	1.64			95	347	3040					2	2	2	1	1			1		
	Elmdon Nature Park	10.69	16			8830	60		4750	500			2	2	2	1	1					
	Bruton Park LNR	2.37	9.5			22			2650	250			2	2	2	2	2					
	Chelmsley Wood LNR/Meriden Park	3.83		1.4		1777			9000				3	3	3	3	3					
	Otton Jubilee Park LNR	1.79	1.12	0.8	500				10425				2	2	2	2	2					
	Malvern Park	1.96				27		1173														
	Babb's Mill LNR	1.79	3.02	0.275		56	85	200	6620			1	2	3	3	2	1			1		
	Coleshill Heath Rd	1.68					20						1	1	1	1	1			20		
	Damson Parkway	0.63									1		1	3	3	2	2			30		
	Knightsbridge Road	1.25	0.82	1.2	650	300		750	895	50		1	1	1	1	1	1			1		
	Marston Green Park LNR	1.64	2.48			54							1	2	2	1	1			1		
	Tudor Grange Park		0.3			2		1129														
Wildlife Ways	Shirley Park								2726													£100,000
	Kite Green					80																
	Streetsbrook Rd POS		1.25			5	104	420					1	1	1							
	Elmdon Park	10.66	5.22	2.8	550	476	690	4342	1425	538			3	3	3	2	1					
	Brown's Coppice	2.04											1	1	1	1	1					
	Coldlands Wood	3.25									2		1	1	1	1	1					
	Cut Throat Coppice	1.83									2		1	1	1	1	1					
	Lavender Hall Park LNR	1.54							225				1	1	1	1	1			1		
	Elmdon Coppice LNR	4.14											1	1	1	1	1					
	Dorridge Park		4.51			1218						2	1	1	1	1				20		
	Various (inc. Stratford Road)												1	1	1	1						
Bees & Trees	Langley Hall Park LNR			0.25	60				2400				1	1	1		1					£60,000
	Bellworthy Wood	0.99				240				10			1	1	1							
	Elmdon Nature Park		0.06						824				1	1	1					75		
	Jobs Close LNR		0.07						3200				1	1	3							
	Palmer's Rough LNR		0.08			40			1222				1	1	3							
	Bridge Meadow Drive		0.37						4463				1	1	3							
	Hillfield Park LNR		1.5										1	1	1							
	Lavender Hall Park LNR		0.9										1	1	1							
	Alcott Wood LNR												1									
	Chelmsley Wood LNR (Meriden Park)												1									
	Tudor Grange Park			0.8	400				7336				1	1	1	4	1					
Frogs and L																						£489,516
Habitats	Tudor Grange Park				150	12			170				1	1	3		1					£66,967
	Hillfield Park LNR		1.04	1.61		80	2782	354	10389		1				6							
		302.74	68.75	9.915	2640	18304	1740	12480	126269	2999	21	8	53	56	73	34	31	145	2	6		£3,549,687

Figure 4 - Spreadsheet summary of project outputs

Management Plans

The management plans are produced to a high and consistent standard. They include clear rationales for work undertaken and contain useful maps to indicate the locations of work. They also contain detailed information on monitoring carried out, site constraints and other aspects.

There is some use of boilerplate text for prescriptions, but this is sensible given that the project involved so many sites and the prescriptions were often applied over multiple locations. The only criticisms are:

- The plans would benefit from brief, non-technical summaries suitable for sharing with stakeholders or contractors to convey the core rationale for work and indicated the main activities which will take place.
- The plans are sometimes over complex, making it hard to local particularly important details. For example, just the conclusions of monitoring could be included, with information on where detailed data can be found.
- As they have been updated there are some issues with the present or future tense being used in what have become historic sections. This does not affect their technical purpose.

Stakeholders external to the Council who have received Small Habitats Grants have been required to produce their own management plans. They have not been required to produce these to the same format but have been allowed to use their own in-house approach. While this has led to some inconsistencies in presentation, there are no insufficiencies in the third party management plans which we have reviewed.

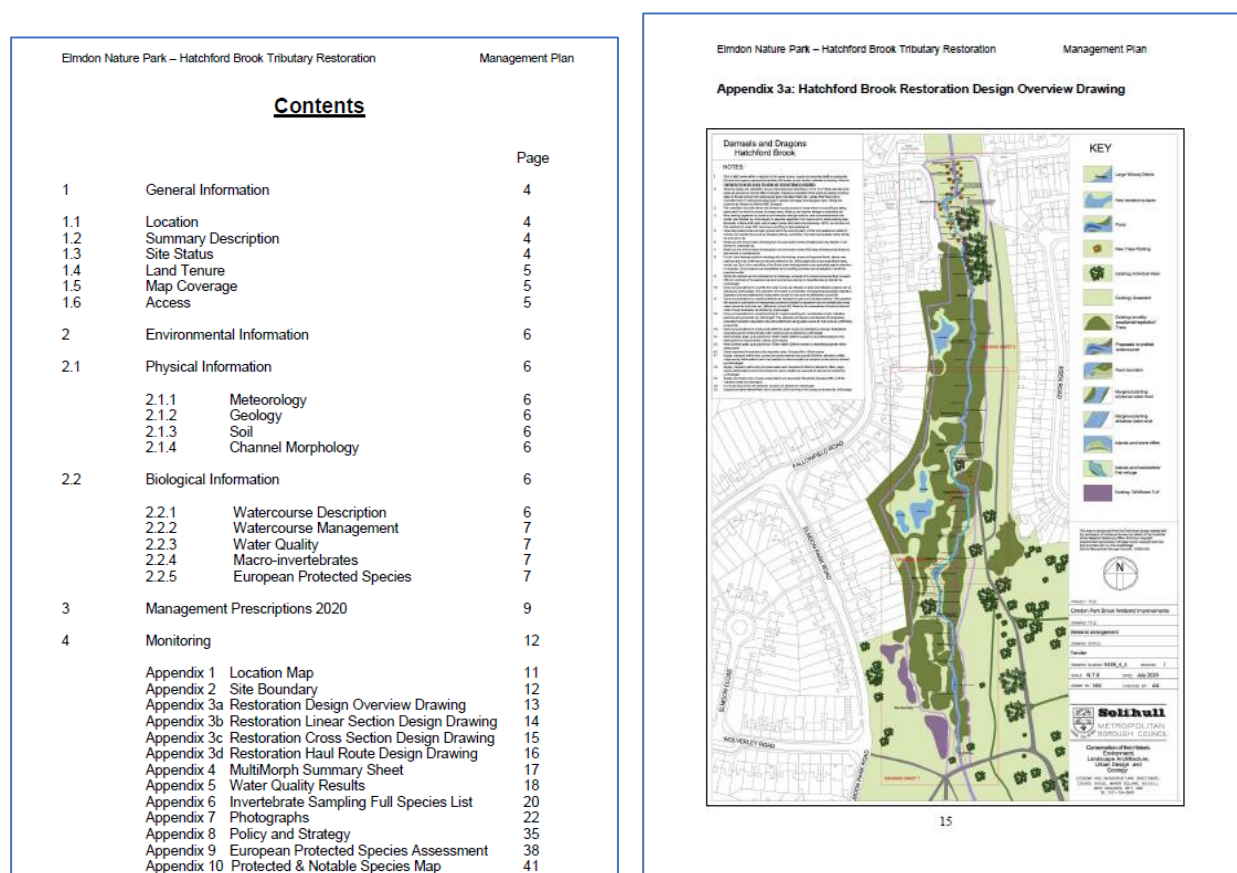


Figure 5 - Example pages from Brook Restoration Management Plan

Covid-19 Pandemic

The initial impact of the Covid 19 Pandemic was felt by the Small Habitat Grant Scheme in Q1 2020. Furloughing of officers at Warwickshire Wildlife Trust led to non-receipt of time sheets.

The council's initial response was to have monthly discussions with applicants as to what that impact was looking like and offering to them as much support as we can.

At that early stage no impacts on the highways or landscape works seem to have been anticipated.

By Q3 2020 a combination of bad weather and Covid-19 restrictions had led significant delays in delivery of the landscape programme. Covid 19 was also causing delays for small grants partners, both with delivery and with the production of invoices and defrayal evidence.

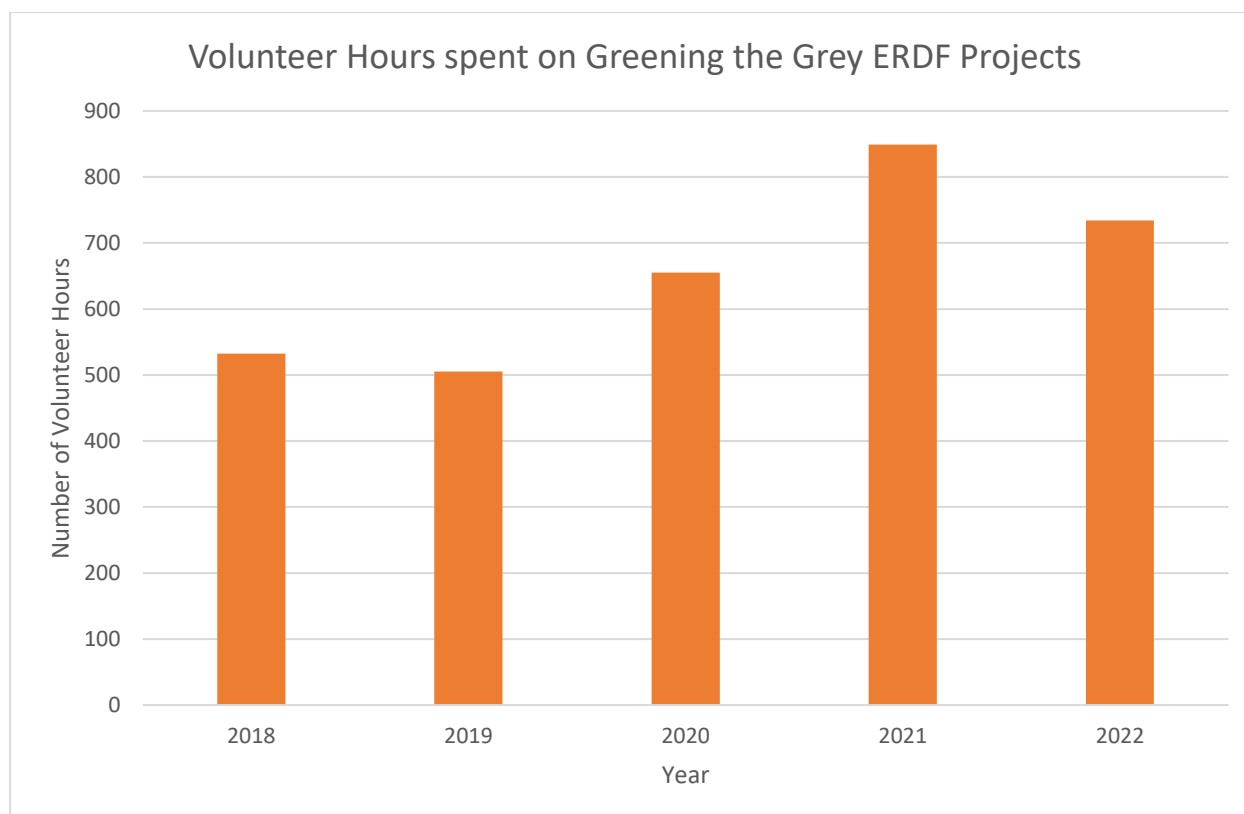
Overall, the quarterly reporting suggests that the impact of Covid 19 on the programme has been relatively minor. However, in discussion with project and grant recipient staff it is clear that they had to face major problems including but not limited to:

- Reductions in staffing due to furlough
- Coping with other organisational impacts (e.g. reduced administrative capacity).
- Changes in working conditions e.g. working from home, suspension of face-to-face meetings.
- Issues around site access.
- Difficulties in liaising with communities, stakeholders etc.
- The wider uncertainty caused by the economic impacts of the pandemic, especially on third sector stakeholders.
- Requirement for two small habitats grants to complete a PCR for extra funding due to the rising costs caused by impact of covid and inflation (Lyric and Newts and Shoots)

For example, most of the staff working on the project worked from home from mid-2020, largely returning to normal practiced during 2022. The limited impact of these restrictions on overall delivery of the project indicated that the difficulties were well-managed and that the staff and partners rose to the challenges presented.

Volunteer Input

The project has received considerable support from local volunteer groups in all years of the project with a total of 3,275 hours or 437 days of volunteer input across the five years 2018-2019. Although 2019 was impacted by the Covid 19 restrictions 500 hours of volunteer input were achieved. This was partly because outdoor activities were still permitted, and it was relatively easy to maintain social distancing.



Activities undertaken by volunteers covered a wide range of activities and included:

Boardwalk construction/repair	Rhododendron control
Bramble control	Ride management
Burning	Scrub management
Coppicing	Seed collection
Drainage	Site furniture install
Footpath construction/maintenance	Tree planting
Hedge laying	Wetland management
Installing benches	Wetland management
Invasive species control	Woodland management
Litter pick	Woodland thinning
Meadow management	Seeding
Plug planting	

Stakeholder Feedback

Owing to the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we were not able to undertake any stakeholder workshops. Restrictions were not completely lifted until the Wildlife Ways works were materially completed and well after most of them were undertaken.

We have been able to make Covid-19 compliant site visits with several of the project staff and stakeholders and have communicated with others at length by telephone and email. Through this we received considerable feedback on their perceptions of the project.

We circulated two versions of a feedback questionnaire to key project stakeholders. The majority of these have been returned although organisations/departments where more than one staff member received a questionnaire generally made only one return.

This feedback has been reflected in our conclusions throughout this report, especially with regard to issues such as planning and management; how the project has dealt with changes and challenges (not least Covid-19); how grant applicants experienced accessing the grant scheme; opportunities for engaging communities and how the work has responded to community feedback; and views of the impact of the project on species and habitats.

The responses from Stakeholders are compiled, anonymously, in **Appendix 5 - Stakeholder Feedback**.

The general questionnaire posed the following questions:

- What aspects of Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways do you feel might have been done better? How could they be improved?
- Are there any lessons you have learned from Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways that you think could help improve other projects in the future?
- What were the biggest challenges in delivering Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways? How did you overcome them?
- Can you suggest any aspects or elements of the project that would make strong case studies to share with others?
- What are your hopes for the project's legacy? Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of the project?

A separate questionnaire was sent to GBSLEP Small Habitats Grant Scheme recipients. The questions were:

- How did you find out about the Habitat Grant Scheme? What was your experience of the application and approval process?
- How did you find the administration of your project? Were there any issues with producing a management plan, evidencing work done, acknowledging grant etc?
- Are there any lessons you have learned from delivering your project that you think could help improve other projects in the future?
- What were the biggest challenges in delivering your project? How did you overcome them?
- Can you suggest any aspects or elements of your project that could make a case study to share with others?

A log was maintained of lessons learned and this is reflected by the consistency of responses, with regards to some important issues such as information sharing and public consultation.

Awards

The project has been recognised through success in achieving several awards.

Chartered Institute of Ecologists and Environmental Managers (CIEEM) Best Practice Large Scale Nature Conservation Award

Awarded in 2022 for 'Solihull Habitat and Nature Improvements Project' (SHNIP).

"This project was developed and delivered by SMBC's Conservation of the Historic Environment, Landscape Architecture, Urban Design and Ecology Team. The three-year programme of woodland, grassland, wetland and water quality improvements was delivered across publicly accessible green space within Solihull, and was completed in Spring 2020."

Birmingham City University, West Midlands National Park Award

Awarded to SMBC in 2022 for 'Making Space for Nature', and umbrella project which included 'Wildlife Ways'.

'Making Space for Nature' demonstrates the impact of large-scale strategic funding (in this case from the EU), which has enabled Solihull to carry out a programme of interlinked projects to preserve and protect the natural environment. It is a key mechanism of the Borough Council's Green Space Strategy which encompasses a diverse set of interventions such as habitat restoration, green infrastructure improvement, and the provision of accessible opportunities for residents to engage through education and volunteer opportunities.

Our judges noted that projects at this scale demonstrate the need to "see the big picture" and that this was a good example of the "long term approach that nature needs". The judges were particularly keen to say that "it will be important to highlight structural approaches and strategies like this, now that the UK making its own laws after Brexit".



Figure 6 - Project video entry for the awards, note ERDF logo.

The Green Organisation's Green Apple Awards, with the Green Champion Award for Carbon Reduction

Awarded in 2022 for the 'Wildlife Ways' project, to our SMBC highways department with contractors Balfour Beatty Living Places.



Figure 7 - Award Symbol.

Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) West Midlands Judges Award

Awarded in 2022 to our contractors Balfour Beatty Living Places for the 'Armed Forces Community Garden' (who worked on this with SMBC and the Royal British Legion, as part of their social value commitment).

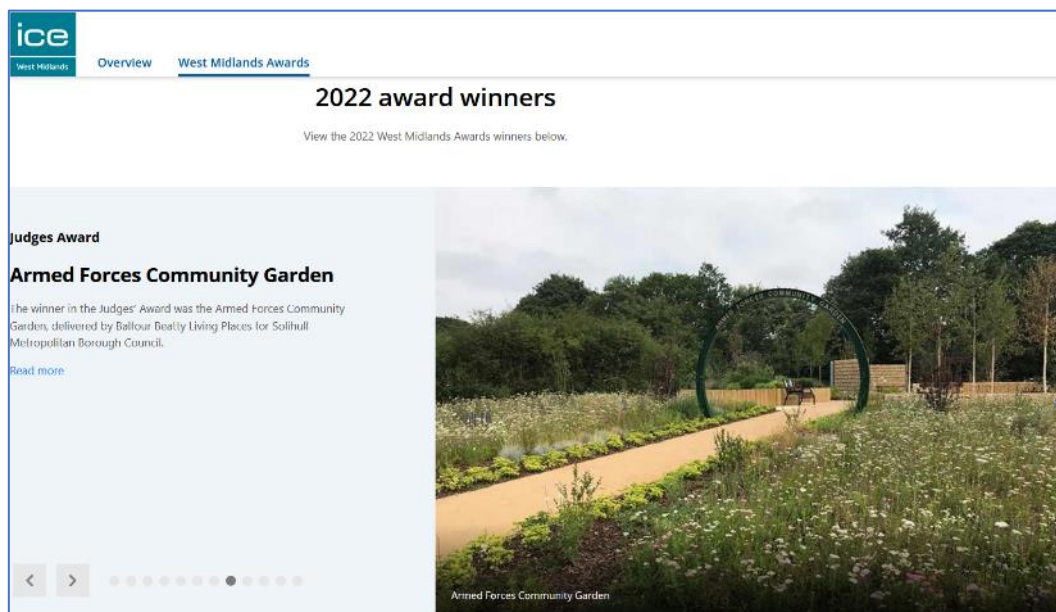


Figure 8 - Award citation.

Landscape Institute 2021 BALI National Landscape awards, Nature Conservation and Biodiversity Enhancement award

Awarded in 2021 to SMBC main landscape contractor Idverde for 'Wildlife Ways'.

Nature Conservation & Biodiversity Enhancement

Sponsored by Ground Control

- idverde for Wildlife Ways

Potential Case Studies

The overall project itself is potentially a case study, although it would obviously be at a fairly superficial degree of detail.

We suggest that some of the best potential case studies at the level of individual project elements are:

Wildlife Ways Project Elements

- Kingshurst Brook – wetland and habitat improvements, plus Route F enhanced shared routes, tree and bulb planting
- Babbs Mill – habitat improvements, plus Route H enhanced shared routes, plus tree and bulb planting.

Brueton Park Grassland Enhancement

Two factors make the Brueton Park grassland restoration stand out as a potential case study:

- The scale of the project.
- The relative success in establishing various species
- How species establishing most successfully reflecting variations in conditions across the site.

Damsels and Dragons – Hatchford Brook Restoration

- The transformational impact on the ecological complexity and habitat diversity of the brook.
- The positive impact on landscape quality.
- The use of a range of detail techniques.

GBSLEP Small Grants Project - Cherry Holme

- The Cherry Holme project represents the second, most impactful final stage of a river restoration, which also resulted in the creation of the largest artificial eyot (river island) in the UK.

Ecological Monitoring

- The ecological monitoring undertaken by the project has achieved a high standard both in how it has been carried out and in how the resulting data has been used.

Project Impacts

Impact on Green Infrastructure

When it concludes, the project will have resulted in the creation of a network of green routes across Solihull and improvement of around 200ha of habitat, mostly within Solihull Borough.

The green routes will have multiple positive benefits for communities across Solihull:

- Providing a major incentive for more sustainable modes of transport such as walking and cycling.
- Improved access to employment sites, local centres and greenspaces particularly benefiting people on low incomes.
- Providing a major improvement in facilities for informal recreation and the enjoyment of green spaces.
- Reducing traffic and therefore reducing pollution including carbon reduction.
- Supporting healthier lifestyles.

The habitat improvements have covered a wide range of benefits including:

- Aesthetic improvements and support for pollinators through structural planting in parks and along green routes.
- Better management of priority habitats including:
 - Grasslands
 - Woodland
 - Wetlands
 - Ponds and streams
 - Heathland
 - Hedgerows
- Increasing ecological connectivity across the urban and peri-urban landscape.

In particular the river and stream restoration work, which has included the removal of weirs and the Renaturalisation of heavily engineered watercourses will have a profound beneficial impact not just along these watercourses but on stretches above and below the areas where work has occurred by increasing connectivity and enhancing the watercourses' ability to deal with pollutants.

Almost all of the improvements to habitats have taken place on accessible natural greenspace, so the benefits do not simply accrue for a biodiversity perspective but also have multiple benefits to local communities and other site users.

This represents a step-change in provision and quality of green infrastructure that is most unlikely to have been achieved via any other means than the injection of a large amount of funding through structural funding.

Wider Impact

The project does not have any specific economic objectives. Nonetheless it is likely that the project has and will have important economic benefits through very visible environmental improvements across the Borough helping contribute to positive perception of the area as a place to live and do business.

The investment in green infrastructure and increased natural capital provides benefits that are intangible and not easily measured, but are likely to include:

- Increasing the attractiveness of the area for inward investment.

- Supporting property values by improvement of the area's image.
- Reduced healthcare costs by promoting and facilitating healthier and more active lifestyles.
- Helping reduce pollution.
- Helping mitigate heat island effects.
- Supporting healthier, more active lifestyles.
- Mental health and quality of life gains.

Although further monitoring work will be carried out on the works to rehabilitate and improve the conservation status of habitats and we can make informed assessments of their appropriateness and likely future impact, the nature of natural habitats is that the full impact of the project will only be observable after several growing seasons.

Allowing for this, the project is bringing wide-ranging environmental benefits. These benefits should continue to accrue for several years beyond the end of the project.

A lack of baseline data (such as information on visitor numbers and attitudes) limits the amount of objective assessment that can be made of the project's social impact. Due to Covid 19 it has not been possible to engage in discussion with site users as much as we would have liked however our assessment is that:

- Many visitors are aware of the project work.
- The work on the sites is generally perceived positively.
- The works have been during a period that has seen increases in use of green space related to the Covid-19 pandemic; it will be impossible to judge the relative impacts of these two factors. However, the changes implemented by the project do seem to have made the sites much more appealing to visitors.

Our assessment is that the project has had a positive impact on local communities by:

- Providing improved natural accessible greenspace for recreation and amenity.
- Supporting healthy and active lifestyles.
- Increasing appreciation, awareness and understanding of the local environment.

Assessing Value for Money

The following approaches have helped ensure that the project delivers good value for money:

- Considerable effort has been put into survey work, planning and design prior to delivery which has ensured the appropriateness of work done and minimised the need for further changes or supplementary work.
- Where additional works have been required due to changes in circumstances this has been delivered within budget.
- Additional funds secured through ERDF are entirely to be used to extend the grant scheme providing additional outputs, not to meet any shortfall in the original proposals.
- All works have been subject to a robust and competitive tender process.
- The cost of work done has been in line with similar projects.
- The work has been done to a high standard.

Also, the project is expected to exceed its original outputs due largely to the quality and scope of the projects put forward for the Small Habitats Grant Scheme.

The project budget has been realistic and is comparable in terms of outputs and costs to other strategic natural greenspace project implemented in the West Midlands including Birmingham Green Rivers and Natural Spaces, Black Country Blue Network 1 and Black Country Blue Network 2.

The Wildlife Ways green corridors in Solihull program had a total cost of around 10.5M. Approximately £6,700,000 of this cost was for the capital costs of creating 23k of new corridors. This gives a cost of under £300,000 per kilometre of highly specified multi-user paths with excellent signage and integration into the wider transport networks.

Typical Costs of Cycling Interventions, Interim analysis of Cycle City Ambition schemes (Report to the Department for Transport, January 2017, Ian Taylor and Beth Hiblin) gives the following summary of costs:

Scheme Type	Range of costs	Range of costs
Cycle Superhighway	£1.15-1.45m/km	two-way physically segregated
	£0.24m/km	two-way lightly segregated
Mixed Strategic Cycle Route	£0.46-0.88m/km	
Resurfaced cycle route	£0.14-0.19m/km	canalside routes
Cycle bridge	£0.10-0.50m	bridge upgrades not whole new bridges
20 mph zone	£10,000-15,000/km	including traffic calming measures without any traffic calming measures
	£2,000-3,000/km	
Remodelled major junction	£1.56-1.61m	cycling-specific schemes
	£0.24m	cycling piggybacking on traffic measures
Cycle crossing at major road	£0.14-0.41m	
Area-wide workplace cycle	£0.20-0.75m	programme cost
facilities	£6,000-7,000	cost per workplace grant

Scheme Type	Range of costs	Range of costs
Area-wide school and college cycle facilities	£0.22-1.16m	programme cost
	£8,000-110,000	cost per school
Large-scale cycle parking	£2.5m	for a very large bike park for 3,000 bikes
	£0.12-0.70m	for secure bike parks for 10s - 100+ bikes, including changing and showers at the largest
Large-scale provision of bicycles	£1.41m	programme cost
	£350	cost per bike provided
Comprehensive cycle route signage	£12,000/km	
Automatic cycle counters	£28,000	programme cost for one cross-city route
	£6,000	cost per counter

While it is difficult to classify the Wildlife Ways project under this scheme (it has sections that could fall into all three of the top categories) it is evident that the cost of around £300,000 per km is towards the lower end of costs and therefore represents value for money for these capital works.

The cost allocated to the 73 hectares of land to attain better conservation status through green corridors was £3,750,00. Records from the council account for 83ha being improved. This works out at a cost of about £45,000 per ha. While this may seem high for habitat improvements, it is important to note that the great majority of the improvements were at relatively small sites, with great complexity. Also the spend figure includes a round 2km of watercourses as well as a wide range of ancillary works most of which does not contribute significantly to area-based measurement:

- Tree and Shrub planting
- Hedgerow planting
- Small areas of wildflower turf
- Individual targeted planting
- Surfaced paths (aside from the green corridors)
- Footbridges
- Gates
- Interpretation Signage
- Management Plans
- Monitoring
- Permit/Licence (EA/FC)
- Site clean ups
- Fencing
- Boardwalks/Steps
- Drop Bollards
- And 'Other Ecological Enhancements' (e.g. Bat and Bird Boxes)"

These costs also reflect the very high cost associated with some of the works that were essentially significant civil engineering projects, such as the restoration of over-engineered waterways; this typically involved the removal of concrete channel linings requiring heavy machinery and generating large quantities of material that needed to be removed even before work could start on the profiling and revegetation of a new channel. Our assessment is that the complex and detailed nature of the improvements across the wildlife ways sites justifies the level of cost per ha.

The grant cost per ha of the Small Habitats Grant scheme averages at £14,000/ha, this is closer in line with typical costs for habitat improvements, again noting that some of the works were particularly expensive (e.g. weir removal and watercourse reprofiling).

For individual projects the cost/ha ranges from £506/ha to nearly £900,000/ha. Even allowing for the wide diversity of projects, the reason for this apparently huge divergence is that some of the projects were expensive engineering projects to improve small waterbodies and watercourses (including weir removal). As waterbodies tend to be small and rivers are 'long thin habitats' and the physical area of the works is small (a large weir only has an area of a few tens of square metres); the true cost/benefit should be properly assessed against the length of watercourse benefiting, which could range from several hundred metres to kilometres. Also, the improvements for biodiversity and water quality of such interventions tends to be profound and long lasting. Finally, improvements to waterbodies rivers bring additional benefits to their wider environs and river corridors.

The most expensive project is the Alderbrook Improvements, this is a small, narrow watercourse and there are no off-stream habitat improvements. Nevertheless, the improvements will bring wider biodiversity and amenity benefits to Tudor Grange Park and the improved river structure will help improve biological and chemical water quality leading to benefits down stream into the River Blythe and Brueton Park Lake. These wider benefits are very hard to place a value on, especially as they integrate with other improvements to watercourses delivered by this and other schemes, but their delivery is essential in order to achieve catchment wide improvements to biodiversity and water quality.

Although these off-site benefits are hard to calculate, it is important not to underestimate the true cost/benefit ratio of these schemes.

Also it was decided to allocate the full 110ha of Bleak House as benefiting from the scrub removal, grazing introduction and invasive species control works at this upland nature reserve. This resulted in the very low figure of about £500/ha improved. In the main this figure relates to the establishment of grazing using geo-located cattle collars, this is very cost effective for an upland site like this as it minimises costs for fencing etc.

If the three most expensive (on a cost/ha basis) wetland-focused schemes (Langley Hall Park Pond Restoration, Frogs and Logs and Alderbrook Enhancements) are excluded, the cost/ha is about £7,000 which is at the low end for such projects.

It should also be noted that after admin costs the SHG had an intervention rate of 40%.

In summary, we consider the complexity of this project and the quality of the interventions achieved represent good value for the investment made.

Future Support Needs

The overarching aim of the project is to bring improvements to natural habitats across Solihull and the Birmingham and Black Country LEP. The benefits from such improvements are limited unless they can be sustained beyond the lifetime of the project.

The riparian sites are the most robust. Where engineered channels have been restored by removal of hard channel linings and reprofiling natural processes of revegetation, gradual erosion and deposition the quality of the river channels is likely to improved further over time without major intervention. The biggest threat is pollution, whether from litter, runoff from adjacent areas or mis-connected drains.

Woodlands are also relatively robust, significant thinning of woodland as has been achieved at most of the woodland sites should continue to influence the diversity of the woodlands for decades, although carrying out further work in the future could bring further benefits. The biggest risks are the return of invasive species (like laurel and rhododendron) their presence should continue to be monitored and acted upon as necessary. Removal of heavy growth of some native species, such as holly and bramble, has been a benefit in some of the woods in terms of enhancing the structure, however in the medium-term major management of these species should not be needed as they should reach an appropriate balance within generally well managed woodland. In the future attention needs to be paid to threats such as *chalara* ash dieback, *phytophthora* in alder and acute oak decline. It is possible that removal of affected trees and even encouragement of non-native species (such as sycamore or beech, for example) may need to be considered as part of eth long term strategy for these woodlands.

Grassland restoration sites are vulnerable to a year or two with inappropriate management (e.g. failure to mow at least once annually; mowing too early or intensively; mowing without removal of cuttings) could result in significant reductions in biodiversity value, and potentially damage to their aesthetic and amenity value, resulting in reduced public support for ongoing management.

The plantings of bulbs and intensive colourful floral areas (e.g. pictorial meadows) will also require appropriate annual management. These areas may appear to be chiefly of aesthetic and amenity benefit but the provision of large areas of nectar and seed-rich plants also offer a major resource for insects, birds and even small mammals along the green routes.

The physical infrastructure of the green routes should be long-lived and robust given the high-quality materials and specifications to which the works have been carried out. Nonetheless it is already evident that some maintenance work will be needed on a regular basis, chiefly to deal with issues such as minor vandalism (e.g. defacing of signs) and local damage to kerbs or site furniture.

Ongoing Maintenance Regime

There was concern expressed by several stakeholders that ongoing maintenance of the ecological sites beyond the contract phase poses some challenges for the council, partly due to limitations of the existing framework contract for grounds maintenance. Addressing this was felt to offer a learning experience for Council and contractors.

We understand that the Council and grant recipients are all committed to ongoing maintenance of project assets for at least seven years.

All of the completed habitat management sites have seven-year management plans in place.

For the green routes an extended period of maintenance has been agreed with contractors which will help with any snagging or issues that arise in the short term.

In the longer-term maintenance will be managed in house and undertaken by a mixture of in-house staff, subcontractors, and in the case of some habitat sites -volunteers.

Summary Assessment of the project

The following is a summary of this evaluation, in a format suitable for transferring to ESIF Form 1-014.

Project Context

Greening the Grey/Wildlife Ways is major project aiming to 'create a network of high-quality spaces woven into the fabric of the borough of Solihull'. The themes of the project are:

Creating green corridors in Solihull, connecting parks, urban centres and employment sites by building green access corridors.

Enabling a greener GBSLEP through the delivery of a GBSLEP wide Habitats Grants Programme, enabling eligible organisations from across the GBSLEP to deliver green and blue infrastructure improvements at a smaller scale.

The delivery of the project chiefly comprises work in three areas:

1. The creation of green corridors throughout Solihull; enhancing verges, parks, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands with the aim of improving green infrastructure and supporting the biodiversity agenda through enabling wildlife connectivity for both floral and faunal species.
2. The delivery of a Small Habitats Grants Programme across the whole of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) – Birmingham, Solihull, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Wyre Forest, Cannock, Lichfield, Tamworth and East Staffordshire. Aimed at the delivery of smaller scale habitat improvement schemes – either blue or green infrastructure improvements and valued at between £50,000 to £500,000.
3. There is an element of support for project staffing and other revenue elements.

The original application stated “Investing in Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) makes sound economic sense – as highlighted in the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity study and the Natural Environment White paper ‘The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature (2011)’”. This fundamental statement justified the original project and continues to be the case.

This project set out to combat the identified market failure through channelling public investment into Solihull’s environmental infrastructure; meeting the vision laid out in Solihull’s Green Infrastructure Study (2014) where: “by 2025 Solihull aims to provide a network of attractive, high quality, accessible green spaces that are managed and developed, recognising the Borough’s landscape character and local distinctiveness, to meet the diverse needs of the community and the natural environment. Our green spaces should be safe, clean and maintained in a sustainable way, becoming an important element of everyday life, for the future enjoyment and well-being of all.” This context remains relevant.

There can be no doubt that the project remains aligned with local and national policy for the addressing climate change and biodiversity conservation. In particular, the project remains consistent with and supports the ambitions set out in *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England’s wildlife and ecosystem services* and the *Government’s 25-Year Environment Plan*, the project is highly relevant to addressing these policy issues.

The project was well designed in terms of comprising actions that were clearly focused on its objectives. The targets set for the project proved realistic and were increased and then exceeded, notwithstanding the impact of the covid-19 pandemic.

Project Progress

The project had to submit a number of project change requests. The complexity and scope of the project led to the need to extend its timescale partly because of the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, further changes were instead focused on minor issues then extending the reach of the Small Habitat Grants.

As a result of these the project's outputs and spend were increased. As of the date of this report the project still has significant outputs and spend to be reported. There is a high level of confidence that the targets for outputs will be comfortably exceeded and the spend will be close to, but below that forecast.

The approach of reporting percentage progress for the Wildlife Ways elements was useful. While such figures have to be estimated, this approach could usefully have been used for the Small Habitats Grant projects as well.

The two main causes of changes have been the covid-19 pandemic restrictions and changes to the Small Habitats Grants. There were minor issues caused by difficulties in appointing suitable consultants.

On the whole it is expected that the project will comfortably exceed its amended spend and output targets.

Project Delivery and Management

This has been a complex project with many different sub-projects. The ambitious network of green corridors and associated habitat improvements benefited from all being on Council owned sites and largely through the work of two main contractors. In addition there was an approach taken that was largely consistent, with relatively minor adjustments and additions to address the specific needs at a local level. This approach allowed the ambitious Wildlife Ways elements to be delivered more or less on schedule. The Wildlife Ways green routes and associated habitat improvement sites delivered a major change and improvement in green infrastructure across Solihull.

The Small Habitats Grants attempted to spread the project's benefits to a much wider range of stakeholders over a much greater geographical area. Despite constant efforts to promote the scheme, there was disappointment that there was not wider take up to the full grant amount available £3.54m. This seems to have been because of two main factors: firstly the relatively high minimum values of grants and secondly the requirement for 60% match funding which effectively meant most applicants having to secure at least three sources of support instead of two. The award body comprised a wide range of partners, not just the council. In terms of delivery, the Small Habitats Grants greatly exceeded their output target, although the overall figure was partly accounted for by one project where there were issues with how the area of output was best calculated. Again the grants achieved major benefits for improved green infrastructure at multiple locations across the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership area.

As has been found with many other projects the role of a Project Manager and other specialist support staff has been critical to the success of this project. The Project Steering Group appears to have been useful but might possibly have met more often. Covid 19 created management challenges for delivery and these were met although at a detail level they impacted on various aspects of the project, including this evaluation.

The standard of delivery of project activities was very high; evaluation visits were undertaken at more than a usual level. The project work observed had been completed to a very high standard.

There were no formal targets for engaging beneficiaries. Community engagement was concentrated on the Wildlife Ways elements. This appears to have been delivered very successfully until Covid 19 created

issues with delivery. The Council effectively used other avenues of communication to keep local communities informed. Despite the impact of Covid 19 the Council achieved a high level of volunteer engagement, mostly around practical delivery of conservation projects as part of the habitat improvements.

We have been impressed by the high standard of monitoring and reporting by the Council.

Overall the delivery and management of what has been a huge and impactful project appears to have been highly effective.

Project Outcomes and Impact

The project will greatly exceed its amended target for habitat improvements. This excess should not be a concern as it largely relates to the Small Habitats Grants where the outputs are greatly influenced by the exact nature of the works carried out. Also the overall figure was partly accounted for by one project where there were issues with how the area of output was best calculated. As these could not be confirmed prior to opening the scheme, it is reasonable that a conservative project should be made.

Most of the incidental aims and objectives of the project have been or will be achieved with respect to habitats, species and environmental monitoring. As is the nature of habitat improvement works further gains for biodiversity can be expected to accrue into the future with the full benefits for the works continuing to accrue over several years. In particular the river improvements can be expected to deliver major ongoing benefits.

The project has delivered improved green corridors, better semi-natural public spaces and significant volunteer engagement.

Activities with local communities and schools were less than hoped due to the impact of covid-19.

It is clear that the project has achieved its intended impacts. The project will result in a sustained impact.

The individual project activities have made clear and visible, often striking, impacts across many sites. Monitoring work has been carried out conscientiously and has demonstrated positive impacts on biodiversity. The nature of these changes can be clearly attributed to project activity, notably the watercourse naturalisation and woodland thinning works which have had a significant impact on biodiversity and environmental quality.

Without a detailed study it is not possible to put a monetary value on the changes achieved by the project. Equally, the other benefits cannot be quantified and attributed to the project in a statistically robust way without detailed study. Studies elsewhere in the West Midlands have shown that investment in green infrastructure have brought a considerable positive return on investment and the same can be reasonably expected of this project.

The project has made a significant contribution to ERDF target C23 to improve habitat to attain better conservation status.

Through strong links to local and national strategies for biodiversity and environmental enhancement the project as well as its positive impacts of publicly accessible greenspace the project will bring considerable added value to the area. Notably, it should bring additional benefits through encouraging informal countryside recreation with positive outcomes on mental and physical health as well as economic benefits from improved public spaces and connectivity and enhancing the image of the area.

Project Value for Money

The project budget has been realistic and is comparable in terms of outputs and costs to other strategic natural greenspace project implemented in the West Midlands including Birmingham Green Rivers and Natural Spaces, Black Country Blue Network 1 and Black Country Blue Network 2.

We undertook a basic comparison of costs with other projects and all aspects of the project can be considered to have offered good value for money.

We understand that all procurement has been undertaken fairly and in accordance with both the partners' and ERDF requirements ensuring a best value approach to expenditure.

Again, we note that past green infrastructure projects of this kind in the West Midlands have brought a considerable multiplier in terms of return on investment when looking at their impact on natural capital and ecosystem services.

In summary, we consider the complexity of this project and the quality of the interventions achieved represent good value for the investment made.

Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

The project is expected to considerably exceed its target of 110ha for C23 Surface area of habitats supported to attain a better conservation status (ha). Financially it is likely to be under but approaching, its reprofiled spend target of £15,319,476. There is no concern about the project achieving its match funding requirements.

The Greening the Grey project has generated a number of positive learning outcomes that have real value for Solihull Council and its partners for future projects and activities at other sites. The following learning outcomes will help future project promoters or partners plan and execute project activities with an understanding of the risks that need to be taken into consideration as well as the risk and contingency strategies that need to be put in place from the outset.

These learning outcomes also show the value of ambitious and wide ranging urban green infrastructure projects.

Project Delivery Body

The Council's approach to delivery of large programs of capital works, supported by a well-managed team of highly competent project officers and other experts has been effective and robust in the face of a number of challenges, not least the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. The in-house skills of rangers, landscape designers and ecologists has been particularly important to ensuring the quality of habitat improvements and in delivering comprehensive monitoring and high-quality management plans. The council also saw real benefits from the investment in a communications officer and a dedicated ERDF Monitoring Officer and ERDF Small Grants Monitoring Officer to March 2022.

The Small Habitats Grants Decision Board played an important role in overseeing the scheme and also helped ensure fair distribution in the face of get a low number of external bids.

There would have been real benefit if the Small Habitats Grants could have offered a full 50% match to applicant organisations, and if the minimum grant could have been smaller. This would have required an alternative source for match funding for an increased level of grant administration. However such changes would have greatly increased the potential of it to reach other stakeholders and achieve wider geographical impact but would have impacted the ability to employ full time Ecologists and the Full time ERDF Small Grants monitoring officer which relied on the delegation grants 10%.

Those designing and implementing similar interventions

Resourcing and management of a complex project requires significant resources to effectively manage and support partners, along with staffing that can support the effective processing of project finances, monitoring and reporting and dissemination. It is vital that any organisation planning green infrastructure projects on this scale fully appreciates the need for a strong support team.

The project saw real benefits from an early start to monitoring and evaluation, with sufficient resources in place to monitor project and grant recipients' activity and produce project claims. Long term monitoring of ecological outcomes will be beneficial and will be continued beyond the contractual duration of the project. Too many projects materially suffer because of poorly planned evaluation and monitoring.

There are multiple potential case studies and examples of best practice arising from this projects that could be taken forward.

Policy Makers

The Greening the Grey project demonstrates the level of impact that can be achieved with well planned and properly funded investment in green infrastructure projects that have a good fit to their wider policy context.

The project emphasises the benefits of good management, administration, design, monitoring and evaluation. These aspects of future projects need to be properly funded and attention paid to the lessons arising from such work.

The Greening the Grey project has key lessons for local and national policymakers on how to develop large scale projects that address climate issues and delivering strategic green infrastructure outcomes.

The Greening the Grey project also has key messages to share with government departments responsible for the Shared Prosperity Fund that replaces ERDF. The project should influence allocation of funding to environmental and climate change focussed projects, particularly in terms of resourcing and longer-term analysis of outputs such as the monitoring of environmental and ecological indicators to ensure the effectiveness of projects.

The project also shows the potential for local distribution of funds through subsidiary grant schemes with a clear focus, however the project has learned some valuable lessons about how such schemes can best operate in order to maximise the impact on local needs (see above).

Accompanying Appendices

The following appendices accompany this report:

Final Report Appendix 1 - Wildlife Ways Green Routes

Final Report Appendix 2 - Wildlife Ways Habitat Sites

Final Report Appendix 3 - GBSLEP Small Habitats Grant Scheme Sites

Final Report Appendix 4 - Logic Model

Final Report Appendix 5 - Stakeholder Feedback