

# Green Recovery Challenge Fund



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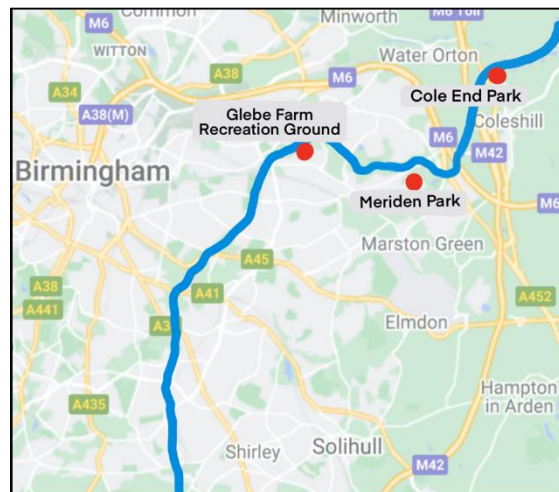
## Love Your River Cole (LYRiC) Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) Evaluation – Executive Summary

The Environment Agency and Tame Valley Wetlands co-funded a Vision for the Valley of the River Cole. This was overseen by a steering group including a wide range of partners. GRCF offered an ideal opportunity for the partnership to turn some of that vision into reality, so an ambitious bid was submitted and was successful in winning £705,000.

The project would be delivered by a partnership made up of the Tame Valley Wetlands team of Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT), Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust (BBCWT), Birmingham City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (Solihull MBC), North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC), The Prince's Trust, Castle Bromwich Historic Gardens Trust (CBHGT) and B37 Project CIC (B37 Project).

The successful project bid included capital works at four key sites along the valley – Glebe Farm Recreation Ground, Castle Bromwich Parkland, Meriden Park and Cole End Park – in three different local authority areas and across two wildlife trusts. It also included a varied training programme, including 6 one-year long traineeships, a suite of training sessions for 16 to 24 year olds run by The Prince's Trust and a series of accredited and non-accredited training events for staff, volunteers and the general public. There were a range of events to reconnect local

people with the green spaces around them. Finally, there was an aspiration to strengthen the partner organisations to make them more resilient in future, and where possible/appropriate, use the services of local businesses to deliver contracts.



Simple map of the LYRiC area and the River Cole.  
Source: Tame Valley Wetlands website

Funding was awarded in late 2020, giving 15 months for delivery of this ambitious programme. An immediate challenge was to recruit the six trainees quickly to ensure they had a full year to achieve their training outcomes – all were in post by the end of March 2021. The trainees were hosted by WWT (2), BBCWT (1), CBHGT (1) and B37 Project (2).



The six LYRiC trainees: Source: Tame Valley Wetlands

The Prince's Trust were able to start their suite of training opportunities early in the project. Their first Explore sessions, day long engagement activities, introducing young people to nature and wellbeing among other aspects, had to be delivered online rather than face to face, due to the Covid restrictions in place in early 2021. By July it was possible for these to take place face to face at the Birmingham EcoPark in Small Heath. Overall, 92 young people participated in an Explore day, either online or face to face, and 11 sessions were run overall.

The Prince's Trust also ran a follow-on programme, Get Started in Nature and Conservation, which was made up of a one day taster session, followed by a weeklong programme of outdoor learning and activity. During the week, young people were able to gain real experience of undertaking conservation works and achieve a Level One qualification in Tool Use. During the project, the Get Started programme ran 4 times, and had 32 participants.



Chainsaw Maintenance, part of the Get Into Woodlands programme. Source: The Prince's Trust

The final programme run by The Prince's Trust was the month-long Get Into Woodlands, run at Saltwells Local Nature Reserve. This ran twice and had 20 participants overall, who had the opportunity to gain their Chainsaw Maintenance and Cross-cutting certificate, regarded as a useful entry qualification for outdoor maintenance work. The participants greatly enjoyed the programme and most achieved their chainsaw certificate.

In addition to the two formal training schemes, there were numerous other training opportunities run during LYRiC. There were a number of fauna and flora identification sessions, including a couple demonstrating bird ringing. The identification training sessions helped to build capacity for wildlife audits across the Cole Valley, and several audits were undertaken, including wildflowers, butterflies, and two BioBlitzes.

A certificated tool maintenance course was run several times, open to trainees, volunteers and staff across all the partners. This was particularly well received by participants and should stand all organisations in good stead going forward. Staff and volunteers will be more knowledgeable about the tools that they use, and better able to maintain them properly, both extending the life of the equipment and also reducing the risk of injury due to poorly maintained tools.

Various events and activities were laid on for the local communities from Easter 2021 through to the end of the funded scheme, with a particular emphasis on school holidays. Events were intended to encourage people to engage with the open spaces local to them and to appreciate the nature around them.



Candle-lit walk at Castle Bromwich Parklands:  
Source: Castle Bromwich Historic Gardens Trust

Events ranged from wellness walks to candlelit walks, from a Big Breakfast to family craft sessions, from embracing small group activity to being part of Solihull MBC's Oaks and Shires event. In some events, such as foraging, the distinction between training and activity was very blurred. Overall feedback from events is very positive and shows that they have been successful in getting people to be more appreciative of the open spaces around them.

Although funded activity started in January 2021, the major capital works programmes at Cole End Park, Meriden Park and Glebe Farm had to wait until after the nesting season and were undertaken in the second half of the project timeframe. By contrast, the works at Castle Bromwich Parkland were able to get going more quickly, with the restoration of the acid grassland starting in the summer months. All capital works were complete by March 2022.

Castle Bromwich Parklands had a programme of habitat management and enhancement that ran through the year, from when a new member of staff dedicated to the Parkland was employed. During the year, there has been work to restore acid grassland, improve the quality of meadow land, restore the historic avenue of trees, improve access through the addition of a raised boardwalk and bridge, as well as clearing paths and installing a nature trail. Works have also been carried out on the wetland areas of the Parkland to improve conditions for

wildlife. Feedback from visitors is that the area already feels safer, but it will take a year or two for the habitat improvements to demonstrate their value.



Simple bridge installed by trainees at Castle Bromwich Parkland. Source: Castle Bromwich Historic Gardens Trust

Above its confluence with the River Cole in Meriden Park, Kingshurst Brook was overgrown, had poor water quality due to slow moving water, and was a magnet for shopping trolleys. LYRIC funded works to narrow the watercourse, speeding up the water flow to improve quality and make it a better environment for invertebrates and the fish and other wildlife that live off them. This should make the area more attractive for local people, with a desired impact of reducing anti-social behaviour and litter.



Completed works at Kingshurst Brook. Source: Tame Valley Wetlands

At Cole End Park, there was a mix of work to improve accessibility and add features to the play area, while also undertaking works to improve the woodlands and

meadow at the Local Nature Reserve that forms part of the larger park. Local residents were consulted on the plans and kept informed about the works at all stages.



New path in Cole End Park to improve accessibility. Source: NWBC.

Glebe Farm was the last of the capital projects to be undertaken, in February 2022. Here access was improved through the installation of paths, as well as improvements to the meadow area and the creation of two wetland areas. These were planted up with appropriate plug plants by volunteers, once the contractors were off site.



Wetlands at Glebe Farm prior to planting. Source: Birmingham and the Black Country Wildlife Trust

A desired outcome from LYRiC was that partners would be more resilient, and that inter-partner links would be established and/or improved. This has been achieved to varying extents between different partners. The Prince's Trust in the West Midlands has been able to demonstrate the value of working with wildlife trusts and

both sides are keen to explore working together in the future.

The capital works undertaken have been designed to be relatively self-sustaining, although areas where scrub has been cleared will need maintenance by volunteer work parties over the years, as scrub has a tendency to grow back.



Corporate volunteering session at Babbs Mill Himalayan Balsam "bashing". Source: Tame Valley Wetlands

Some partners now have a larger and more diverse pool of volunteers to call on to help with site maintenance and also with events and activities for local communities. The local economy has a number of better qualified and interested individuals able to make a difference to the environment, through volunteer or paid work.

The achievements of the LYRiC project are being shared widely through a series of visual blogs (Vlogs), professionally produced, and showcasing the different sites. The short segments about individual projects can also be used by the partners to demonstrate their ability to undertake funded environmental conservation works, both in reaction to bidding rounds and also when proactively seeking external support.

Whether the desired environmental legacy from the capital works will be achieved is hard to say at present. With the majority only just completed, wetlands look raw and unappealing, and as spring arrives, it is only now that the trees at Kingshurst Brook will show whether they have survived the cutting and laying that was done as part of the work to narrow the channel. The capital works will need time

to settle in and meet their full potential, supporting a wider range of fauna and flora. There is good reason to believe that this will happen, given time.



Kingshurst Brook with shingle added. Source: MRE Unlocking Enterprise

All partners are better placed to undertake biodiversity audits at the sites in future, and should aim to publicise whether the works undertaken have achieved the required goals for wildlife.

A number of local organisations have improved their capacity and capabilities with the project. There are direct impacts on the partner organisations, particularly those in the third sector. The Prince's Trust has a new area where it is able to offer opportunities to young people, and they have already teamed up with another West Midlands GRCF project to deliver more Get Started in Nature and Conservation courses. Birmingham and Black Country Wildlife Trust is expanding its staffing, thanks to its involvement in LYRiC. Some local businesses have been able to consolidate their trading status and expand their customer base as a result of working with LYRiC.

All six LYRiC trainees successfully submitted portfolios for their Level 2 City

and Guilds qualification which will greatly improve their prospects for employment in this sector.

LYRiC was only ever intended to address part of the vision for the River Cole and future work will be needed to join up the green spaces along the valley.

There have been a number of valuable lessons learned during the LYRiC delivery, as set out below:

- Even with projects where timescales are short and deadlines are tight, ensuring communication flows between all partners is crucial, and not just on funding issues.
- In order to build sound working relationships with new partners, time needs to be set aside to explore and understand each other's aspirations, capacity and capabilities.
- Having trainees work as a team across organisation boundaries improves the learning experience for the trainees and provides them with better support.
- The benefits for partners working across geographical borders is clear and provides a foundation for collaborative work and funding applications.
- Interpretation materials always take longer to produce and put in place than expected.

Overall, the partners have achieved all the outputs they set out in their application for GRCF. It will take time to see whether the longer term outcomes will also be achieved, particularly around habitat improvements for wildlife and reconnecting local populations with their green spaces.



Tame Valley  
Wetlands



**Birmingham &  
Black Country**  
Wildlife Trust



**Birmingham**  
City Council



**Solihull**  
METROPOLITAN  
BOROUGH COUNCIL



North Warwickshire  
Borough Council



Castle Bromwich  
Historic Gardens



*Supporting local projects in  
art, food & the environment*



**Prince's Trust**