

Saving the Saffron Brook Evaluation Summary

JANUARY 2024



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"Saffron Brook was a real lifeline for me in lockdown. Being able to discover nature on my doorstep was amazing and this project has really improved the local area."

Feedback from the Celebration Event ~ June 2023

Saving the Saffron Brook was a Green Recovery Challenge Round (GRCF) 2 project, which ran from November 2021 to June 2023. Led by Leicester City Council and involving multiple partners, the project met the aims of the overall GRCF programme whilst also delivering environmental and social benefits in Leicester. Working closely with Trent Rivers Trust, catchment-wide improvements to habitats and new habitat creation will leave a legacy of improved resilience for wildlife far beyond the funding period. The community engagement elements of the delivery resulted in local schools and community groups taking part in a wide range of activities, and the formation of new groups committed to understanding and protecting nature in the longer term.

This document is a summary of the key achievements of Saving the Saffron Brook and explores the legacy that short-term, directed funding can create in a well-managed and supportive environment.

Wreath Making

"It was brilliant! Lots of choice for 'greeneries'. Nice to have the possibility to use wire to tie it all up/secure the wreath. Tea and mince pies/biscuits were a nice touch. Good to have two people leading the workshop, this meant that there was always someone available for questions."

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) was an £80m fund seeking to support nature recovery and conservation across England. In November 2020, GRCF Round 2 (£40m investment) was announced via the Prime Minister's Ten Point Plan (The ten point plan for a green industrial revolution - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) to further support environmental renewal while creating and retaining a range of jobs in England. It was a short-term, competitive fund that kickstarted environmental renewal while creating and retaining jobs in England. The GRCF supported a range of projects in restoring nature, using nature-based solutions to tackle climate change, and connecting people with the natural environment. With the climate crisis continuing to worsen, the GRCF also sought to actively support and meet goals within the UK Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (25-year-environment-plan.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)) to enhance people's engagement with the natural world and improve the environment within a generation. All GRCF projects were required to deliver against one or more of the following three environmental themes:

- (1) Nature conservation and restoration: habitats, species and ecosystems,
- (2) Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate mitigation and adaptation, and
- (3) Connecting people with nature.

As the GRCF was created in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all projects were also asked to align with the GRCF's aims to:

- Support job creation and retention, as well as skill development within the conservation sector and its supply chains, and
- Enhance the capacity and resilience of eNGOs in terms of their financial stability, assets, skills, capabilities, and governance

How Saving the Saffron Brook addressed the GRCF Requirements

(1) Nature Conservation, Restoration and Nature-based Solutions

Taking a catchment-wide approach, sites were identified from the source of the Saffron Brook where it rises in Oadby to the confluence with the River Soar in Aylestone, Leicester City for interventions to restore the river to a more natural state, use natural flood management techniques to reconnect to the flood plains and hold water in the landscape. Throughout the catchment new habitats were created and existing habitats restored or improved. New wetlands and woodlands will continue to benefit the living world far into the future, whilst the improved grasslands will need ongoing maintenance to retain the diversity of species that the project has allowed to flourish.

(2) Nature-based solutions, particularly for climate mitigation and adaptation

Saving the Saffron Brook (SSB) created 1.5ha of new wetland to help store water in the landscape. Woodland creation extended to 1ha of new plantations with over 2,000 mixed native deciduous trees planted, which will help to store carbon. Improvements to 2ha of species rich grassland will ensure their continued role as a carbon sink.

(3) Connecting people with nature

Alongside the physical interventions in the landscape, the Saving the Saffron Brook project engaged local schools and community groups through a programme of citizen science activities and playful events to connect people with nature. The project team supported the creation of three new community endeavours including the start of a new “Friends of” group for the Washbrook Nature Area (a small public open space with diverse habitats), the Saffron Scythers, who benefitted from scythe training paid for by SSB and the Otter Spotters, who were trained and equipped by the project to monitor otter signs throughout the catchment.

The landscape interventions included improving footpaths, signage and access points to the key sites with three new interpretation trails being created and a total of 2.7km of footpaths improved, allowing much better accessibility to the reserves and nature areas.

Throughout the project, two to three community volunteering sessions per week were led by Rob Sayer, Environmental Ranger, involving over 1159 volunteer person days. The project could not have been delivered without the volunteers, who carried out tasks such as tree-planting, clearing non-native vegetation, woodland maintenance, sowing new grassland species and many, many hours of litter-picking (418 bags of rubbish and 262 bulky items being removed in total).



	Planned	Delivered	Difference
Volunteer tasks and engagement activities	65	136	109%
Volunteer engagement	455	1,159	155%
Volunteer days delivered	243	490	102%

The job retention and NGO resilience elements of SSB consisted of:

- (1) New roles were created at Leicester City Council for the duration of the funded project. These were a Project Manager and three entry level Project Assistants with different specialisms. The Project Manager and one Project Assistant were based in the Conservation department within the Planning, Development and Transportation division. The other two Project

assistants were matrix managed by the Project Manager and a manager in the department hosting them with one being based in Parks and reporting to the Environmental Engagement Manager and one based in Sustainable Schools and reporting to the Sustainable Schools Manager.

Two of the three Project Assistants obtained permanent roles in their respective departments during the project but continued to support SSB in their permanent positions. The Project Manager stayed with the Council on a temporary extended contract working on other biodiversity/climate-related projects and the remaining Project Assistant left the Council to work for a Wildlife Trust, so was still retained within the environmental sector.

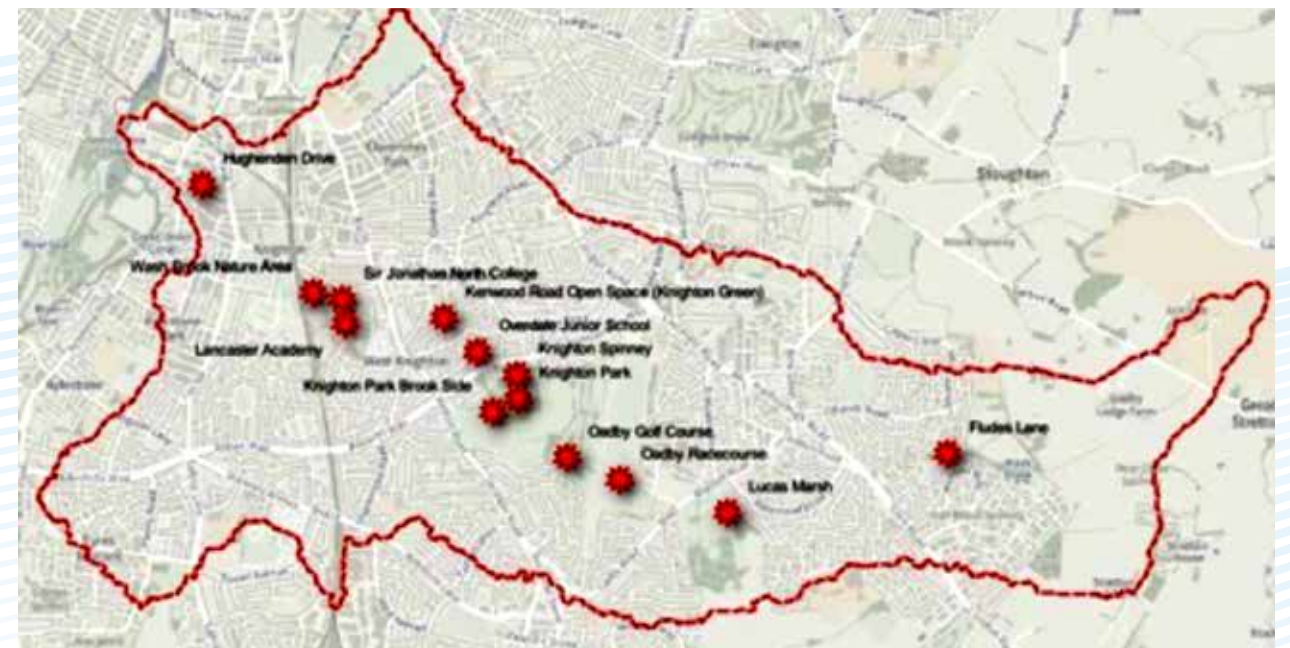
Roles were retained at the Trent Rivers Trust (TRT) with direct funding from SSB, including a Project Manager. A range of practical and back-office roles were supported at the charity through the grant, which provided full cost recovery for TRT in relation to the GRCF delivery.

The project also employed a range of contractors for the delivery of habitat interventions, including works carried out by private companies, social enterprises, charities, LCC Landscape, Parks and Highways departments and sole traders. For example, the creation of two outdoor classroom spaces at schools in the catchment was carried out by Wildscapes, a local micro-enterprise, and all the bird, bat and kingfisher homes (56 individual units) were installed by Ian Underwood, a local sole trader and conservation enthusiast.

The overall impact of the project on job creation and retention has been significant, although the short-term nature of the project means that employment benefits in the longer term are limited.

Bat Walk
“It was a well organised event with all of the different habitats explained with an excellent level of expertise give in a relaxed and informative manner.”

The Saffron Brook Catchment and the Project Sites



Thank you so much for arranging for these gorgeous sculptures - they look fabulous and I am really excited to see the kids engage with them.

Anne Scott
(Forest School Lead
Overdale Primary)



Otters Webinar

"I thoroughly enjoyed the event which was well organised. I also learned a lot and gained new knowledge."

Landscape Interventions, Habitat Creation, Restoration and Improvement

River re-naturalisation was at the heart of the project. The Saffron Brook had been highly channelised into concrete with false or eradicated meanders, so the expertise of TRT, working under permits from the Environment Agency and Severn Trent Water was key in deciding where interventions could take place. The river interventions comprised:

- 10 new or modified pools/wetlands/backwaters created.
- Gravel added in 9 locations.
- 5 sites with brushwood mattresses, leaky barriers and large woody debris added.
- Banks re-profiled at 3 sites.
- 3 meanders re-naturalised following concrete removal.
- 4 culverts removed and replaced with bridges at 3 locations.
- 1 old bridge abutment removed.

Woodland, wetland and grassland creation formed the remainder of the landscape interventions, accompanied by the installation of new homes to aid recovery of specific species. The following were installed across the catchment:

- 30 bird boxes
- 20 bat boxes
- 6 kingfisher tubes
- 2 bug hotels
- 1 otter holt

Woodland creation was the most difficult element due to resistance from local people to new tree planting in parks and residential areas. A large area identified outside the city boundary also failed to secure landowner agreement for woodland, although 1ha of improved grassland was created at the site. Consequently, the planned area of woodland planting was reduced from 2ha to 1ha and the trees were planted in five different sites using different planting techniques. The trees and guards were supplied by the



The choice of sites was based on a study by Trent Rivers Trust and further discussions with the project Steering Group, which consisted of representatives from various Leicester City Council departments (Conservation, Parks, Flooding and Drainage, Planning) and Oadby Borough Council, along with TRT. All the sites illustrated with red stars had physical interventions for habitat creation/improvement, accessibility and for running events or volunteering activities.

The project worked with 11 schools within the catchment area. Three of these have the brook running through the school grounds. These had specific interventions. A local chainsaw artist developed a sculpture trail depicting riverside plants and animals (Oak Leaf, Otter, Bat and Dragonfly) for Overdale Juniors, which complemented a new outdoor classroom next to the river itself. At Sir Jonathan North Academy a new Forest Garden and outdoor seating area were created by local permaculture gardener, Dani Pattuzzi. Lancaster Academy also had a new outdoor teaching area created next to their existing wildlife-rich pond. Over 400 mixed native trees were planted in an underused area of Lancaster's school grounds, connecting to both the brook and railway line as wildlife corridors.

Other schools benefitted from education sessions and trips to the river, where the children took part in kick sampling and other citizen science activities. There were also weekend/family sessions including a Bioblitz/Family Funday at Saffron Acres.

Woodland Trust under their MoreWoods scheme which supplied all the saplings and plastic-free tree guards and stakes at a 75% discount. All the trees were native grown and the species mix was designed for maximum diversity and climate adaptation.

Management of the woodland habitat included selective thinning of trees and clearance of non-native species. The results of the many hours of volunteer time to clear brambles and non-native geranium resulted in a beautiful show of native wood anemones in Spring 2022.

Grassland improvements over 2ha created impressive results initially but maintenance of the sites in the future remains uncertain due primarily to lack of funding for Parks staffing and ongoing communication difficulties regarding the complexities of the planned mowing regimes at different sites. Early mowing can completely undo the restoration work and this occurred at several of the newly seeded sites.

The wetland creation elements were some of the most exciting of the whole project, especially at Washbrook Nature Area where ponds were restored and extended. The contractor was described as “Michelangelo on a digger” due to his ability to create variations of depth and contour thereby creating a habitat rich landscape in a confined space. The new offline pond at Knighton Green created much excitement from neighbours as Moorhens occupied it almost straight away and it also had frogspawn in the Spring.



“I wanted to say a massive thank you to you guys for what has been an absolute pleasure to be a part of, one of my proudest times as teacher has been to help facilitate the planting of these trees and the rest of the Green Flag project so huge thanks to you and your volunteers! We will have to meet sometime to discuss future care of the trees.”

**Marvin Pythian,
Lancaster Academy**



- Knighton Wild held sessions with a local artist and children from the area to create an interpretation trail for Knighton Green celebrating wildlife and the seasons based on the children’s artwork.
- Leicester and Rutland Wildlife Trust ran playdays at the brook in Knighton Park and Washbrook Nature Area with children making rafts and exploring the invertebrate life in the water.
- Leicester University students came to the catchment on their field trip and recorded the water quality through kick sampling at two locations providing baseline data for future years.
- Saffron Acres hosted a Bioblitz, the Schools Celebration and scything training lead by Steve Tomlin. This led to the formation of the Saffron Scythers, who are now managing the grassland at Saffron Heath using scythes paid for by the project.
- The Otter Spotter group formed to look for otter signs along the catchment and discovered that our waterways are definitely otter highways.
- A series of guided walks and online training linked to the 100 Species Challenge got people looking at nature across the sites and learning to record species on Naturespot, adding to national data on local biodiversity.



Community Engagement

Despite the very short delivery window, SSB ran a full programme of community engagement working with schools, community groups and partner organisations. Some of the highlights were:



- EAGA Gospel choir came to Knighton Spinney to participate in a research programme with Leicester University on barriers to nature connection for people from minoritized communities. They wrote a song about the brook, which they performed at the side of the brook during the Knighton Park show.

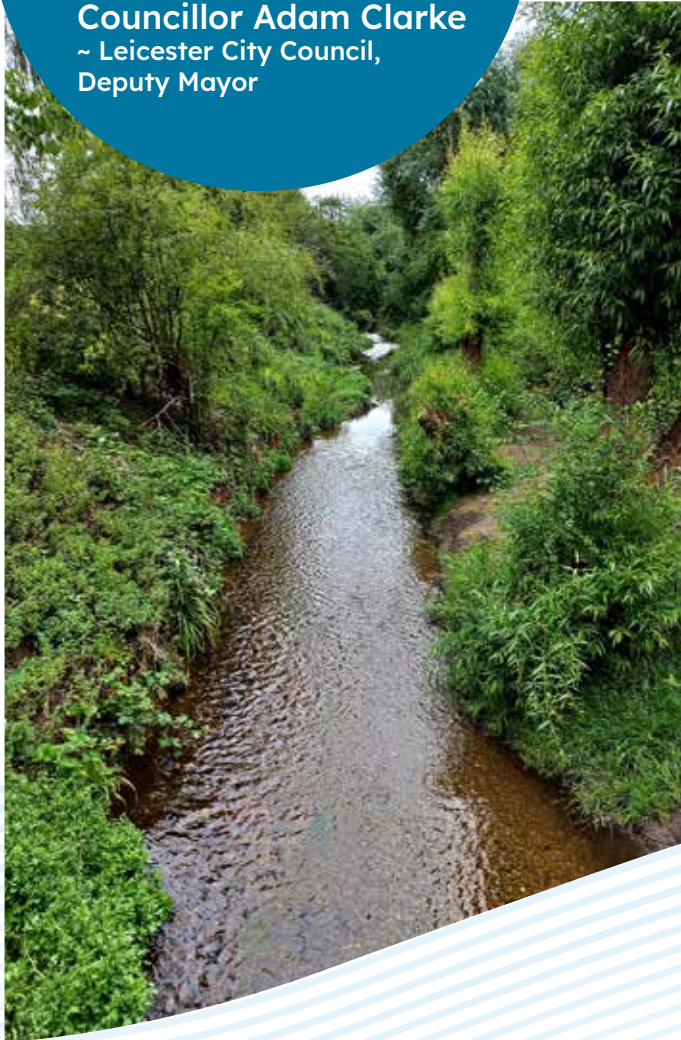


Wreath Making

"It was brilliant! Lots of choice for 'greeneries'. Nice to have the possibility to use wire to tie it all up/secure the wreath. Tea and mince pies/biscuits were a nice touch. Good to have two people leading the workshop, this meant that there was always someone available for questions."

"Saving Saffron Brook has been really important for wildlife and biodiversity in Leicester. The project sits as a little beacon to showcase what can be achieved across blue and green space within the city"

Councillor Adam Clarke
 ~ Leicester City Council, Deputy Mayor



Project Legacy and Lessons for the Future

The relationships established between the many partners in the Saving the Saffron Brook project have created strong bonds and positive working relationships that will provide a foundation for future collaborations.

The Saving the Saffron Brook project was chosen as an exemplar for sharing at the 20 years of Catchment Based Approach event, which took place in London in November 2023 due to the number of positive outcomes in both nature restoration and community engagement.

The project's substantive changes to Leicester and Leicestershire's parks and open spaces will help drive nature recovery. The project was fully aligned with Leicester City Council's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and achieved targets for both specific habitats and specific species, including bats, kingfishers, hedgehogs and otters.

The project was fully supported by the Soar Catchment Partnership and exemplifies what can be achieved by working at catchment level, which respects natural boundaries rather than artificial or political divisions.

With a longer funding period and support for maintenance activities, much more could have been achieved. A longer time span would have allowed more time to secure landowner agreements and required permits. This has been recognised as an issue across all the GRCF projects in the Government's own evaluation report from the national level.

The Green Recovery Challenge Fund Round 2. Final Summative Report (heritagefund.org.uk)

Nevertheless the project has been recognised as a success and a great launching pad for further river restoration and nature recovery works in Leicester City, in line with international and national objectives to reach Biodiversity restoration targets.



Thank You!



Green Recovery Challenge Fund



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

The
National Lottery
Heritage Fund



Environment
Agency



Leicester
City Council