GREENER GREENWAYS
A LARGE UK-WIDE INITIATIVE BY SUSTRANS, PROMOTING BIODIVERSITY

Location: Wales, North West of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, the Midlands and Scotland
Implemented: 2013 - 2016

Greener Greenways is a large scale project combining biodiversity with active travel routes, initiated and delivered by Sustrans from 2013 to 2016. Its aim has been to promote biodiversity, conservation and habitat along 38 sections of National Cycle Network routes that are owned, managed or where agreements were made for these to be enhanced by Sustrans.

These Greener Greenways routes are located across Wales, north west of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, the Midlands and Scotland. Whilst the original funded initiative formally drew to a close in 2016, it has created an enduring legacy of trained ecology volunteers, habitat management plans, partnerships and improved biodiversity and greenspace accompanying these 38 Greener Greenway active travel routes.

Examples of Greener Greenway routes include the Airdrie to Bathgate section of NCN 75 between West Lothian and Lanarkshire, Longniddry to Haddington in East Lothian on the NCN76, the Way of The Roses (Route 69) from Morecombe to Bridlington in Yorkshire, Derby Canal Parth and Cloud Trail between Derby and Worthington.

"[I like the] different habitats, views of the surrounding countryside, and the former historical significance of the route. The [Greener Greenways] route [near me] has encouraged me to walk and cycle more as there is so much to see and experience.

Joseph Waclawski, local resident of Kilbarchan, Sustrans."
PROJECT BACKGROUND

Greener Greenways is a biodiversity conservation project targeting 38 traffic-free walking and cycling routes owned, managed or enhanced by Sustrans, across Wales, England and Scotland. The project ran in Scotland as well as England and Wales for three years, from 2013 to 2016. The initiative was founded on the premise that connectivity is as important for wildlife as it is for people, and so aimed to improve these routes for both biodiversity and the end users of the route who cycle or walk along them. The Greener Greenways project received funding from a variety of sources, including the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Scottish Natural Heritage, Big Lottery Fund, Environment Wales and Natural Resources Wales.

The earliest incarnation of Greener Greenways was a proposal for a smaller-scale project called Greenways ABC (access, biodiversity and communities) in 2008-2009. Funding bids for this scheme were unsuccessful, so the proposal was reviewed and revised in the years that followed. The permanent recruitment of an ecologist for Sustrans in England and Wales and production of a Sustrans LBAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) in 2010 was the driver for a renewed look at how Sustrans and partners managed their routes and land corridors. It was these discussions that led to the final Greener Greenways proposals and successful funding to implement the project from 2013 to 2016.

Sustrans define greenways as “traffic-free routes which are attractive, generally well separated from traffic and continuous over obstacles and through road junctions. Quite typically greenways may run along old railways, canal towpaths, riverbanks, forest roads and tongues of open space leading into urban areas. Although greenways are often rural, many of the most popular and important ones thread their way through the urban fabric.” (Sustrans Design Manual).

One of the core aims of Greener Greenways has been to improve knowledge about the nature present along green active travel routes. To do this, Sustrans use a combination of expert surveys, volunteer surveys, data searches and consultation with conservation organisations to identify flora and fauna. The survey information collected feeds into the NBN Gateway, national surveys and the Sustrans dataset used by their dedicated Greener Greenways ecologists, to create habitat management plans for the routes. These habitat management plans are aimed at protecting and enhancing habitats and species, increasing biodiversity and
improving habitat connectivity, and offer insight into the potential role each Greener Greenways route can play in connecting up routes for wildlife as well as people. Large numbers of the Greener Greenways’ wildlife records have been generated through these volunteer survey sessions. Volunteers are given training courses on species identification, and the opportunity to become a wildlife champion, a role whereby they become a front-line steward and local advocate of the greenway routes and their biodiversity.

Whilst the Greener Greenways initiative has comprised 38 different and unique routes across the UK, we’d like to highlight one example in particular which demonstrates the impact the Greener Greenways programme can have. The Airdrie to Bathgate cycle route in central Scotland was redeveloped in 2010 as part of the railway line reinstatement. Proposals for route and habitat enhancement were developed by Sustrans and Central Scotland Green Network Trust (CSGNT) in partnership with North Lanarkshire and West Lothian Council. This included the planting of trees, hedgerows and wildflower meadows in several locations along the route as part of Greener Greenways, with the aim of diversifying habitats and enhancing biodiversity, providing public amenity and focal points, and windbreak areas along the exposed route. An ecological survey helped find the best location for the creation of these habitats, to ensure they would not adversely affect other species along the greenway. The majority of tree and hedgerow planting was carried out in 2015 by a contractor, and on a smaller scale by Sustrans volunteers. A wildflower meadow was created by volunteers and further areas of grassland were taken into management to promote wildflower species. In addition, natural stone informal seating was installed at strategic points along the route to build on picturesque views across the countryside of North Lanarkshire and West Lothian. This created points to stop and rest, as well as feature points on this route within the exposed plateaux landscape of central belt Scotland. Follow up maintenance has since been carried out by Sustrans volunteers as part of the legacy of the Greener Greenways project and is ongoing, ensuring a lasting improvement to habitat and management.
OUTPUTS: WHAT AND HOW?

The Greener Greenways routes total 280km in length and link with over 5,000km of additional greenways in those regions. In Scotland, the project targets 100km of greenways managed by Sustrans and over 100km managed by other organisations. These are part of just under 600 miles (965km) of traffic-free greenways in Scotland. In October 2015, the UK Greener Greenways project won second place in the Exemplary Initiatives award category at the prestigious European Greenways Awards.

Whilst the exact outputs of each individual Greener Greenways project varies based on the location, context, partners, local groups involved, existing condition and potential for improvement, this approach deliberately bringing together green infrastructure, biodiversity, community and active travel typically led to:

- **Biodiversity enhancements**, improvements to numbers and diversity of species and habitats along the route.
- **Engaging local groups and communities** to actively participate in environmental surveys, maintenance work-days and events as part of the greenway. This drives feelings of ownership over these green active travel routes, fosters intergenerational social connections, develops skills, and provides biodiversity and ecology education via citizen science.
- **Increasing numbers of people walking and cycling** due to enhanced connectivity, improved quality routes and a more pleasant green environment.
- **Improving amenity value and accessibility** of active travel routes, including creation of additional places to sit, rest and pause along linear routes.
- **Partnerships and co-operative working** with local authorities, voluntary groups, academic and natural environment organisations that often leads to long-term partnerships and outputs.

For example, for the Greener Greenways section of the Airdrie to Bathgate NCN75 route, Sustrans developed partnerships with North Lanarkshire and West Lothian Council. Sustrans volunteer groups are now playing a key role in providing longer term maintenance, whilst specialist ecological advice helped in earlier
stages by providing ecological and habitat surveys that have input into the species selection planted.

Throughout the Greener Greenways project from 2013 to 2016, a number of these outputs were quantified as part of the Greener Greenways programme in Scotland. These include:

- **55 wildlife training days** delivered over the three-year period. These were attended by 407 different attendees, 90% of whom were wildlife champions.
- **Over 12,500 wildlife records** were collected by volunteer wildlife champions in Scotland over the life of the project. These were added to Sustrans’ iRecord Site, Natures Calendar and the NBN Gateway.
- **Facilitating ‘citizen science’ surveys** with volunteers, including the Big Bat Map, OPAL air quality survey, UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, BeeWalk, and the RSPB’s Big Garden Birdwatch.
- **12 wildlife walks** for the public were organised in 2015, one on each of the 12 Greener Greenways routes in Scotland. The walks aimed to draw public attention and raise awareness of the project, and celebrate the richness of wildlife on each of the routes.
- **12 habitat management plans** were prepared for each of the 12 National Cycle Network routes selected as part of the project in Scotland.
- **390 people attended volunteer workdays** to manage and maintain Greener Greenways between 2013 and 2016, including 288 Wildlife Champions.
- **20 different habitat management activities** were carried out on Greener Greenways in Scotland, including grassland, wetland, woodland, and hedgerow management and creation, orchard creation and management of invasive species.
- **100% of wildlife champions** said that Greener Greenways had increased their knowledge and understanding of their local environment and wildlife in a 2015 survey, and 78% said that Greener Greenways had increased their knowledge of local walking and cycling routes.
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

From the project’s outset, Greener Greenways was designed to bring about benefits for biodiversity by integrating green infrastructure with existing active travel corridors. As part of the initiative, greening has either been retrofitted into existing active travel routes, or improved management techniques have been employed to improve existing habitats and species. Whilst many of the biodiversity benefits will require ongoing maintenance and management to be realised in full longer term, the project has been successful in helping to set the groundwork.

One important method the Greener Greenways initiative has used to deliver biodiversity benefits along these active travel corridors is by improving the physical connectivity between different habitats, and viewing these as networks rather than routes in isolation. This approach was inspired by the Living Landscapes report by The Wildlife Trust, which showed that to adapt to climate change, wildlife corridors were required to allow species to move and adapt. This approach has also led to additional knock-on benefits, such as improving the overall condition and aesthetic quality of the Greener Greenway routes for the enjoyment of those using them.

Greener Greenways has also increased the public’s connection and involvement with biodiversity and habitat management in their local area. In their 2006 position paper, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) stated that the biggest threat to the UK’s biodiversity is if the conservation movement fails to engage with the general public, and that biodiversity is a lost cause if restricted to experts and enthusiasts. The Greener Greenways project changed perceptions that habitat management is purely a specialist activity for ecology professionals. It has opened up opportunities via volunteer workdays, wildlife training, and activities, for a diverse range of people to learn more about biodiversity along these routes.

Some of the most important benefits the Greener Greenways project has delivered include:

• **Improved biodiversity** - by delivering tree, hedgerow and wildflower planting the range of habitats and species is diversified. Together with other planting improvements these help create a wildlife corridor that links to other green networks.
• Increased accessibility - for example, seating installations on the Airdrie to Bathgate NCN75 route as part of Greener Greenway improvements now provide rest points for those walking or cycling. In combination with enhancements to create a high quality smooth surface, and more pleasant environment for walking or cycling away from traffic, access is made easier particularly for disabled or elderly persons.

• A place for children - Greener Greenway routes offer a safe and pleasant place for children to spend time outdoors, close to wildlife.

• Increasing popularity of active travel - by improving cycle and walking routes as Greener Greenways, greater numbers of active travel users are encouraged, which in turn increases visibility and helps catalyse more cycling and walking behaviour.

• Health and well-being - by encouraging more active travel and physical exercise in green surroundings, health and mental well-being are improved.

• Improved wildlife knowledge - through dedicated survey work by volunteers, knowledge of the wildlife that each active travel ‘greenway’ route supports has increased. This information is readily available to a range of conservation organisations and thus contributes to habitat and species conservation research.

• Increased feelings of ownership of the routes by local volunteer groups and communities and less reliance on ever-shrinking resources available to local authorities.

[The main benefits of Greener Greenways are the] chance to get out and switch off from normal everyday pressures. People usually smile and say hello when you meet them - it’s a chance to communicate with the world. [I like that they are] traffic free and closer to nature. I walk more than drive for commuting now due to the Greener Greenway.

Local resident

Community engagement and support is vital to the success of the project. Many of these corridors are or will become community green spaces and fostering a sense of ownership through involvement is essential. Ensuring that the community understand what is being done, why it is being done and what the benefits are is vital – indeed this is also important for professional staff.

Philip Kearney, Programme Manager, Sustrans Scotland

Wildlife Champion training in lichen identification, Greener Greenways Scotland.
KEY LEARNING POINTS

Partnership is key to Sustrans’ Greener Greenways initiative. To date Sustrans has worked with a variety of partners on the 38 Greener Greenway routes across the UK, including wildlife organisations, local authorities and other network organisations. Specific partners have included the Canal and River Trust, Scottish Canals, Network Rail, Highways Agency, Railway Paths Ltd, Butterfly Conservation, Flora Locale, Woodland Trust, Buglife, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, Bat Conservation Trust, Scottish Waterways Trust, Plantlife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, and The Wildlife Trusts. By pooling resources with these partners, mutually beneficial relationships have resulted, sharing training, skills and work days to ensure more targets and outputs are met whilst minimising costs. The partnerships that formed with other organisations also led to discussions highlighting overlapping interests and ways to initiate, fund, and deliver future phases of the Greener Greenways initiative together based on collaborative working, rather than separately competing for decreasing resources.

In addition to organisational partners, developing partnerships with landowners has also been important. This was because few of the National Cycle Network routes that became Greener Greenways were owned or managed by Sustrans. As such, obtaining landowners support and cooperation was vital to ensure successful delivery of the project. A learning outcome from this approach has been the importance of entering into discussions and agreements with partners and landowners early in the process, setting out and identifying the roles and responsibilities of each party. In discussions with landowners and other partners, it was also found to be useful to emphasise the particular benefits tailored to their area of interest. For example, focussing on biodiversity, greenspace, community engagement, land management or climate change benefits as appropriate.

Sustrans’ Greener Greenways project also worked with local partners, professionals and individuals, for example local authorities specific to each route, professional ecologists, and local residents and volunteers. Together this collaborative approach has been highly successful, both in terms of delivering the range of benefits and positive outputs from the project, and in building ownership of each route. A key learning point has been the important role that trained volunteers can play in helping to maintain, monitor, and champion these green active travel routes and their ecology. For example, as part of the project a number of wildlife champion volunteers were trained in various biodiversity and habitat surveys, with 55 wildlife training days completed in 2013-2016 as part of Greener Greenways Scotland, with 407 attendees. Equally, it was found to be very important to involve both route managers and maintenance staff in the project to ensure buy-in and long term success.

One element of the Greener Greenways project that has worked particularly well is the greenway management handbook provided by Sustrans. This has helped communicate the aims and objectives of greenways, as well as practical tips and resources to promote greenway management by a mix of local people, organisations

"I like that Greener Greenways provide a safe, green corridor to cycle on. Plenty to stop and see as the seasons change. It’s a pleasure to travel along beautiful green corridors. They are good for both active travel and the environment."  

David Robertson, Sustrans volunteer, East Lothian
and groups. For example, the handbook highlights the desired use of greenways for:

- **Social activities** - creating a place to meet or run events which is used by a wide range of people and groups and contributes to their physical and mental health and well-being.
- **Educational activities** - providing opportunities for a memorable experience, running an outdoor classroom or taking part in citizen environmental science projects.
- **Economic activities** - delivering benefits such as the regulation of floods, soil erosion and disease outbreaks, making a space to hold fundraising events or producing products such as food.

The greenway management handbook helps ensure that all partners, organisations and volunteers are on the same page, and co-ordinates and promotes the way greenways can be managed by all those involved to best benefit biodiversity.

One of the main anticipated outcomes of Greener Greenways was that partner management regimes would be improved as a result of the Greener Greenways initiative, therefore enabling a project legacy to be delivered sustainably beyond the funded 2013-2016 project period. However, a challenge has been the reduction in funding available for management and maintenance in recent years. This has meant some partners have struggled to adopt the maintenance practices and procedures advocated via the Greener Greenways management plans for that area, reducing their ability to maintain these green routes to better promote biodiversity and habitat. Working collaboratively with partners to jointly source funding is one potential way to navigate this challenge, as well as ensuring resources for ongoing management and maintenance of routes and habitat are considered and incorporated from the outset.

A challenge also presented itself in how to achieve a good balance of citizen science wildlife surveying and ongoing monitoring activities (which were found to be easier to recruit volunteers to engage in), compared to more intense work days for implementation of the greenways management plans (which were more resource intensive for staff to organise and harder to recruit volunteers for). This was tackled by dedicating more staff time to organise work days later in the programme, as well as commissioning professional contractors to carry out some of this work as needed.

Overall, key learning points from the Greener Greenways initiative show that the combination of partnership working, participation of local groups, and providing a legacy of toolkits and handbooks that enable consistent high quality management and on-going planning for Greener Greenways routes are integral to their long-term success. The project has been particularly successful in engaging local volunteers in educational wildlife activities that benefit both people and environment, in encouraging on-going management and maintenance, and in creating more pleasant green active travel routes which local people feel a sense of ownership over.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The culmination of the Greener Greenways project was the production of the Best Practice Greenways Management Guide for dissemination to a wide audience of professionals. This helps communicate and share what has been learnt from the project for application elsewhere.

The greenway management handbook also underpins the principles behind each of the habitat management plans prepared for the Greener Greenways routes. The handbook and the plans help to steer ongoing maintenance and management of each greenway, based on the principles of ‘understand, manage and monitor’. By following the habitat management plans guidance, ongoing positive and appropriate management of these green active travel routes will continue.

To date Sustrans have supported 38 Greener Greenway routes as part of the National Cycle Network. Even though the Greener Greenways pilot initiative ended in August 2016, many of the trained volunteers involved continue to help monitor biodiversity outputs as wildlife champions, and take part in volunteer work days on the NCN and Greener Greenways routes, facilitated by Sustrans. For example, between October and December 2016, 41 wildlife surveys, 473 wildlife records, and 13 biodiversity workshops were undertaken by Sustrans Scotland volunteers on NCN routes. This ongoing legacy and continued management is integral to ensuring the positive impact of projects such as Greener Greenways have lasting impact for biodiversity as part of green active travel routes.