

River Colne Pilot Report - Co-producing a new Green-Blue Infrastructure Strategy for the River Colne:

Executive Summary

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1. Background and Context

This report examines the first stage in the design of a new Blue and Green Infrastructure (BGI) Strategy for Colchester Borough. Closely connected to ‘green infrastructure’ (GI), BGI refers to an integrated approach to managing, improving and/or reintroducing natural and semi-natural green (vegetation) and blue (waterways) spaces in both urban and rural contexts. BGI has four key benefits: promoting biodiversity; mitigating and adapting to climate change; human health and well-being; and creating prosperous communities (Natural England). These translate into a wide variety of environmental, social and economic benefits (Essex GI Strategy, 2020, p. 37).

The new BGI strategy will replace Colchester Borough Council’s (CBC) existing Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy (CBC, 2011). There have been a number of contextual changes since the publication of the previous strategy at the national, local and regional level. In particular, following the declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019, ‘Tackling the climate emergency and leading sustainability’ has become one of CBC’s key strategic themes. The strategy will also need to respond to national policy changes, such as the ‘biodiversity net gain’ principle to be introduced by the Environment Act 2021, and the introduction of a new GI framework for Essex (ECC, 2020).

Partnerships, participation and engagement are widely considered to be key factors in delivering successful BGI strategies. This is important for understanding and building user needs into designs, integrating local knowledges, resolving conflict and achieving local buy in and ownership. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledgement of the importance of participation and engagement in working with BGI, guidelines remain typically incomplete and ways to effectively manage the process are often poorly understood (Everett 2021).

Building on prior collaboration and knowledge-exchange between Essex Business School (EBS) and CBC on Participatory Budgeting (PB) and funded by the University of Essex’s Priority Challenges Fund, the aim was to examine potential participatory approaches to guide the development of the new BGI strategy. An appropriate scope for the pilot was selected by focusing on one particular blue-green area: the river Colne which runs throughout the heart of the Borough.

This report offers insights regarding how CBC can leverage on participatory-driven, multi-stakeholder-oriented co-production of the new BGI strategy. Firstly, we analyse the priorities identified through participatory methods by stakeholder participants on new priorities for the

river Colne. Secondly, we present an analysis of the reflections of participants on their experiences of participation during the pilot. Finally, we develop a series of possible participatory approaches to the future development of the BGI strategy.

2. Aims and Methods

The main objectives of the River Colne pilot were:

1. To use a participatory approach to identify stakeholders' key **priorities** for the River Colne, as an example of one important blue-green space within Colchester Borough;
2. To identify participatory mechanisms which would enable CBC to shift from consultation to **co-production** of the new BGI strategy.

The pilot provided a valuable opportunity to test and develop a model for a participatory approach to developing the wider BGI strategy.

The research that informs this report was conducted between April 2022 and July 2022. The data derives from four main sources:

- A documentary analysis of key national, regional and local policy publications;
- Discussions and materials produced at two workshops held in June and July 2022 with a wide variety of key stakeholders;
- A pulse survey completed by participants following the first workshop;
- 12 semi-structured interviews with CBC organisers and stakeholder participants following the workshops.

3. Key Findings and Recommendations (1): Priorities for the River Colne

The first set of findings relate to the participants' key priorities for a future BGI-approach to the river Colne. These are the results of an analysis of data collected during workshop discussions, participant interviews and from survey results.

Firstly, we draw general conclusions related to the existing GI strategy (CBC, 2011) and approach to the river Colne. Whilst the content and approach to its design were largely praised by participants, there was a sense that **the strategy had not been effective or proactively implemented**. Overall participants expressed **concern about the quality** of the river Colne, particularly with respect to sewage, effluent, weeds and silt. Many expressed the need for **better river management**.

Secondly, participants identified four key areas for the new BGI approach. These were:

- **Protecting** existing BGI assets
- **Enhancing and restoring** local BGI assets
- **Creating new BGI assets** for wildlife and human users, including improved infrastructure for **inclusive access**
- **Promoting connectivity** for biodiversity and human users

A number of example projects in each category are considered in greater detail in the main body of the report. It is notable that these largely overlap with Essex County Council's (2020) GI strategy.

Thirdly, the workshops and interviews revealed the potential for conflicts. On the one hand, there was the possibility for conflict over **different material interests or ideological preferences**. At the same time, different knowledges, including knowledge acquired through lived experience, contributed to **different ways of viewing and valuing the river**. Significantly, deliberation in the workshops revealed at least a partial modification of initial opinions as a direct result of workshop discussions.

The BGI priorities presented here were identified through a meaningful participatory approach with key stakeholders with deep involvement in local BGI assets. We therefore propose that they may **usefully inform and/or frame future discussions around the further development of the BGI strategy**. They may also help CBC and its partners consider mechanisms for integrating different knowledges and managing future conflicts. However, it must be remembered that they represent only the initial results of the pilot project and therefore should **remain open to revision through future participatory mechanisms**.

Key Recommendations

- Use the findings from the pilot to inform and/or frame future strategy development, but ensure they remain open to revision through participatory mechanisms
- Value and integrate different knowledges in the development of the strategy
- Enable the expression of different perspectives, including opportunities to develop and modify existing views through education, communication and deliberation
- Actively consider how the new strategy can be effectively enacted, including through co-monitoring, and how this work can be widely communicated.

4. Key Findings and Recommendations (2): Participatory Methods

The second set of findings are drawn from the analysis of participant reflections on the participatory methods used in the pilot. Overall, the participatory approach taken at the workshops was well received and the benefits of early and ongoing involvement between CBC and other organisations were recognised. However, several areas for further improvement were also recognised.

Firstly, whilst the diversity of participants was praised, **some stakeholder groups were less well represented**. For example, there was less representation of some groups of river users, residents, landowners, commercial interests, or disadvantaged communities. It is unclear if this is because they were uninvited or chose not to attend. It was also notable that, since a stakeholder approach was taken, workshops largely consisted of organisational representatives. **Citizens without connections to known organisations or CBC** were missing. Since retired people are more likely to be involved with voluntary organisations, **younger age groups** were under-represented. Whilst youth workers did take part, there were no youth representatives.

Secondly, whilst participants supported a participatory approach, there was **disagreement** about how participatory processes could be made most **effective**, including within the context of climate change actions. **Scepticism** was also expressed that the Council would approve an ambitious and sustained participatory approach.

Finally, there was considerable **enthusiasm** for the River Colne pilot and for **continuing involvement** with the overarching BGI project. However, this is likely to be dependent upon perceptions of the legitimacy and efficacy of the process, and particularly upon the project delivering **demonstrable results**.

Recommendations

- Work with organisations from the outset and in an ongoing, sustained partnership to harness the benefits of their knowledge, experience, networks and contributions.
- Continue to grow and cultivate the network which began to be developed during the River Colne pilot.
- Develop a more systematic approach to future stakeholder engagement and involvement activities.
- Explicitly identify and engage under-represented groups, including developing broader citizen engagement at key stages of the project.

- Investigate a range of participation opportunities at all project phases, including conceptualisation, design, delivery and monitoring.
- Take measures to proactively enable the equal participation of all groups.
- Ensure project deliverables are identified, realised and well communicated throughout the strategy development process.
- Demonstrate and communicate an active, ongoing commitment to participation, including ensuring that other ongoing and otherwise realisable projects are not interrupted or postponed by the strategy development.

5. Possible Participatory Approaches to the Future Development of the BGI Strategy

Finally, we develop a number of potential participatory approaches to the future development of the BGI strategy. In most cases, approaches arose from participant discussions and reflections, which were then developed further in the analysis.

5.1. Building Partnerships with Key Stakeholders

The research confirmed the perceived importance of building partnerships with key stakeholders, particularly organisational representatives. Three interrelated approaches to building partnerships were considered. Whilst the first two are relevant for the BGI strategy as a whole, the third was an important theme emerging from discussions particular to the pilot's specific geographical focus.

- 1. Build a Partnership Group** of nominated representatives from key stakeholder organisations to share knowledge sharing, including exploring different funding opportunities. The pilot suggests there is already ample interest to begin developing a Partnership Group from the network built during the pilot.

To be successful, the Partnership Group would need to agree clear objectives at the outset. Participation would need to be institutionalised, with clear allocated responsibilities, and the process should be well-supported and -resourced. The work of the group should be transparent, well-publicised and well-communicated, with some of the work physically taking place within blue-green spaces.

- 2. Hold future stakeholder workshops** with key stakeholders representing other blue-green spaces in the Borough to develop the wider BGI strategy. To maximise potentials for co-production, a ‘fluid motion’ model could more explicitly shape future workshops, enabling the discussion to expand and then contract throughout the strategy building process.

Key considerations include identifying a realistic timeframe and adequate resources for preparatory work between sessions, ensuring sufficient knowledge is at the disposal of participants, and effectively integrating different workshop discussions on distinct green-blue spaces, potentially by using the Partnership Group itself as the forum for future workshops.

- 3. Consider more effective management structures for the river Colne**, made up of nominated individuals with clear responsibilities. The aim would be to overcome the problems caused by viewing the Colne in a fragmented manner to better manage the river as a whole. To reduce conflict and increase buy-in, initial decisions on establishing management structures and aims should be made through appropriate participatory processes. Significantly, future management of the Colne should be fully integrated within the Borough’s wider BGI-strategy.

5.2. Collaborative Mapping (A Mixed Stakeholder and Citizen Approach)

A Participatory Socio-Ecological Mapping of blue-green spaces could involve a very wide range of participants, including national and local organisations, community groups, citizens, scientists amongst others. CBC would need to coordinate the process, potentially supplemented by external expertise. A key aim of the mapping exercise would be to collate and further develop a detailed evidence base for the GBI strategy, including baselines for co-monitoring the strategy.

This would have at least three key benefits. Firstly, the collaborative development of the evidence base for the strategy would itself be an instance of co-production. Secondly, it could be used as the basis for a more systematic approach to identifying stakeholders. Finally, the project could act as a key method for engaging, educating, communicating with and learning from citizens.

5.3. Citizen Engagement

Whilst the importance of public engagement was widely recognised as crucial to the success of the BGI strategy, ideas for engaging citizens were least well developed during the pilot. Three possible approaches are discussed in the report.

- 1. Championing Community-Led Initiatives as Co-Production.** Designing easier processes for supporting and co-producing community-led initiatives which are in line with the BGI-strategy, could represent an effective (including cost effective) way to co-produce BGI initiatives and reduce conflict. However, it may not well represent less well organised or resourced citizen views.
- 2. Identify Climate-Sensitive Participatory Budgeting Opportunities** to engage local communities in co-producing BGI initiatives, including disadvantaged communities. One approach would be to identify a small-scale pilot, to learn lessons for developing and eventually institutionalising PB as part of the long term BGI strategy.
- 3. Promote and facilitate multi-directional education and communication initiatives,** led by a range of actors, to develop a widespread understanding and appreciation of blue green spaces. CBC role may be to coordinate and facilitate initiatives, potentially including through PB opportunities

6. Conclusions

It is now well recognised that a thoughtful, well-conceived BGI strategy can enable authorities and communities to harness the multiple benefits of positively managing and promoting blue-green spaces. To be most effective, appropriate participatory processes should be used throughout the entire process, from conceptualisation and design to implementation and monitoring. The river Colne pilot successfully utilised meaningful participation with a wide range of key stakeholders. The findings from the study have engendered an understanding of the ways in which CBC could leverage on the lived experiences and unique expertise of diverse stakeholders and citizen groups, in developing a new BGI strategy that will help the Council to accelerate the realisation of net zero goals. In particular, the pilot has delivered:

- An outline of priority areas for the river Colne for the future Borough-wide BGI strategy to further develop. The analysis discussed in the full report could be helpfully used as a starting point for further participant deliberations in the ongoing strategy work
- A detailed evaluation of the benefits and limitations of the participatory approach taken, including identifying areas where further work needs to be done to identify, engage and empower stakeholders, communities and citizens.
- A framework of potential participatory approaches which could be used at different phases of the ongoing development of the BGI strategy.

Significantly, the pilot also revealed the multiple ways in which participants value the river and other blue-green spaces within the borough. Harnessing the passions and energies of participants and other local stakeholders and citizens will be key to developing and delivering a successful BGI strategy for Colchester Borough, and effectively leveraging the many benefits BGI can offer.