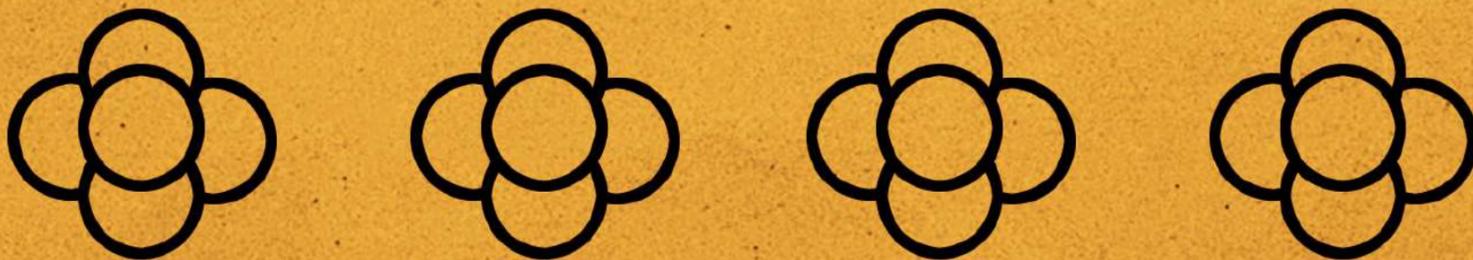
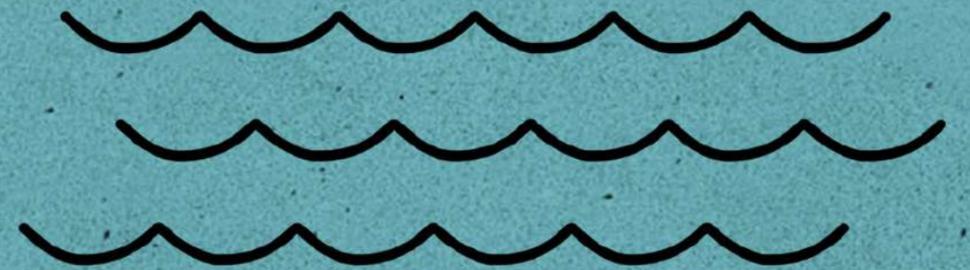
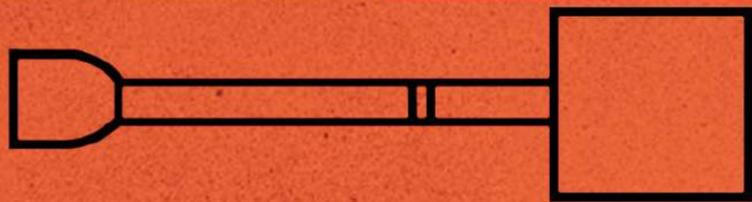


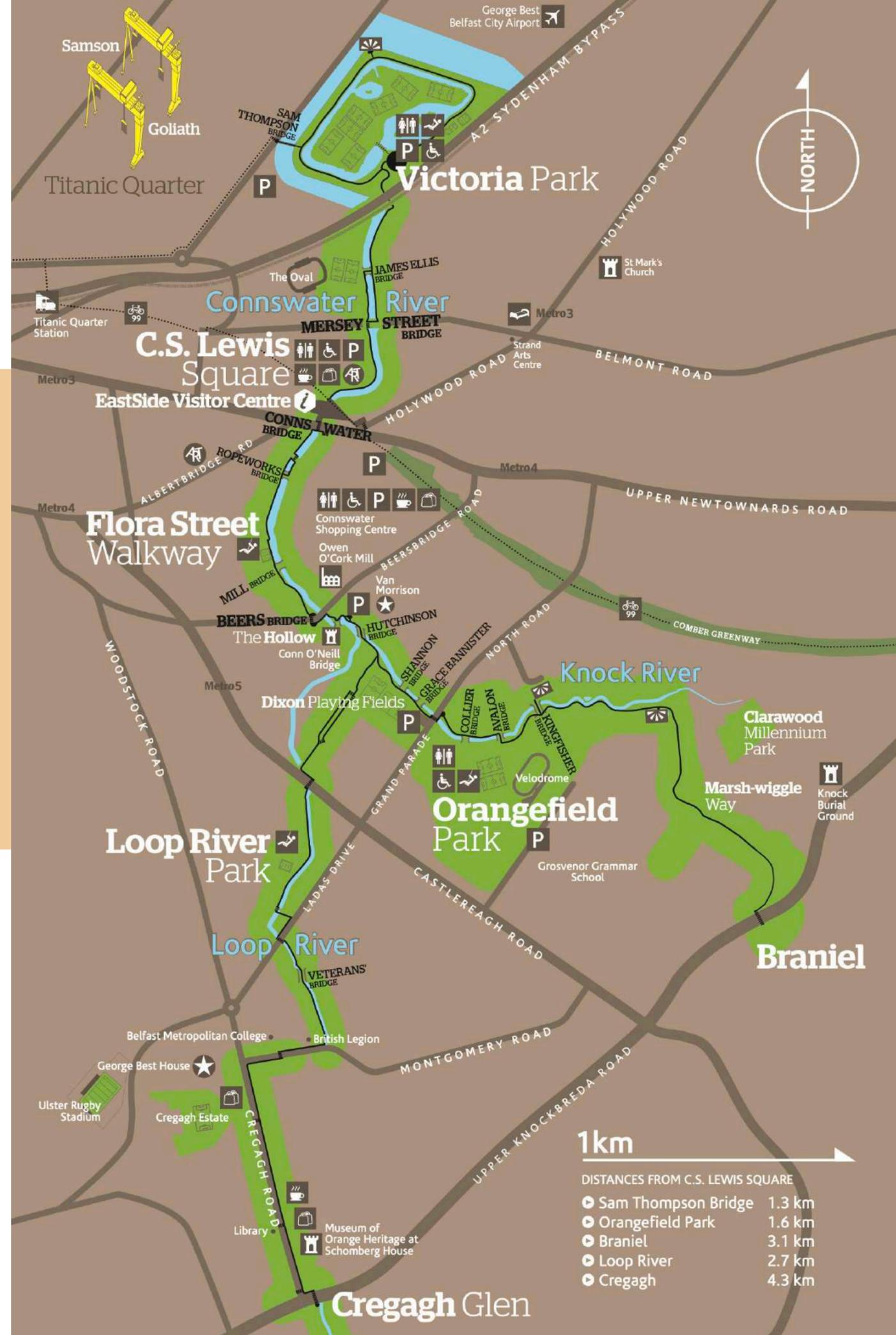
**CONNSWATER
COMMUNITY
GREENWAY:
ACCESSIBILITY AND
INCLUSION STUDY**



Contents

1. Introduction
2. Objectives
3. Community Involvement
4. Engagement Findings
5. Recommendations
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June 2024





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1 Introduction

1.1 A more accessible and inclusive Greenway

In 2023 EastSide Greenways (ESG) and researchers from Queen's University Belfast, appointed Studio idir and Baroudeur Consultancy to undertake a stakeholder and community engagement process that would look at the Connswater Community Greenway through the lens of accessibility and inclusion with an emphasis on engaging with older people and people with disabilities.

The brief for the project was as follows:

1. To carry out engagement, gathering feedback on current use of Connswater Community Greenway.
2. To create a report to inform conversations on how to make the Connswater Community Greenway an inclusive and accessible space;
3. To detail recommendations through visuals and design drawings.

The Connswater Community Greenway is a £40 million investment in East Belfast to create a linear park comprising green spaces and 16km of foot and cycle paths along the Connswater, Loop and Knock rivers, as they flow from the Castlereagh Hills to Belfast Lough. The project was developed by EastSide Partnership and delivered by Belfast City Council. It was funded by the Big Lottery Fund, Belfast City Council, the Department for Communities and Department for Infrastructure. An £11 million flood alleviation scheme incorporated into the project has helped reduce flooding to 1700 properties. This investment is one of only three "living landmarks" in the UK, offers a legacy for future generations and acts as a catalyst for further public and private investment in East Belfast.

This report introduces the team, outlines the methodology, details stakeholder and community engagement, and makes recommendations based on the findings that can be actioned in the short, medium and long term.



1.1.1 Queen's University Belfast SPACE Project

The SPACE research project consists of a diverse team investigating how urban design and effective urban planning can prevent cognitive health decline, with a deep commitment to engaging with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that research findings are disseminated in such a way that they generate the highest impact. The project aims to provide evidence to inform policies and interventions that will provide supportive urban environments to promote healthy ageing, including promoting brain health.

See <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/space/> for more information.

1.1.2 Queen's University Belfast GroundsWell Consortium

The GroundsWell Consortium includes researchers, local communities, implementers, and policymakers, working together to create a virtuous cycle of research, data, policy, implementation, and active citizenship to better understand and evidence the role of Urban Green and Blue Spaces (UGBS) within broader social, economic, environmental, cultural, and health systems. The team at Queen's University Belfast have been conducting research on the Connswater Community Greenway since 2010, led by Professor Ruth Hunter. See <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/groundswell/> for more information.

1.1.3 EastSide Greenways

EastSide Greenways (formerly the Connswater Community Greenway Trust), is a registered charity that works to maximise the potential of the Connswater Community Greenway as a catalyst for ongoing physical, social, economic and environmental regeneration of East Belfast. EastSide Greenways overall aim is to "promote the sustainable development, management, improvement and use of green open spaces, parks and rivers in east Belfast for the benefit of the public."





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1 Introduction

1.2 The Team

1.2.1 Studio idir

Led by Dr Aisling Rusk, the studio is a design-led architecture practice in East Belfast. Aisling’s research on spatial practices that build connection in divided/contested contexts is embedded within the practice’s approach. This project has been led by architect Katie Stringer, who is an illustrator of ideas, a passive house designer and a local of the Connswater Community Greenway, who also faces her own personal accessibility challenges. The practice welcomes opportunities to work with marginalised communities, spaces and people in creative, collaborative and inclusive ways.

Studio idir



A photo collage of people engaging with maps, posters, colouring-in and 3D models from a Studio idir engagement project in Belfast.

1.2.2 Baroudeur Consultancy

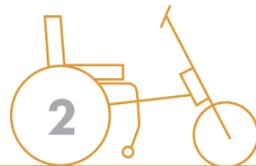
A small Scottish consultancy specialising in facilitation and stakeholder engagement traversing education, sustainability and wellbeing. Director Niall Shannon, a passionate advocate for active travel and a former teacher, has previous experience working with Sustrans supporting the development of the Scottish Greenways Programme, along with the delivery of an audit of barriers and access issues for the National Cycle Network in Scotland.

1.2.3 Wider Team

EastSide Greenways and researchers from the SPACE project and GroundsWell Consortium at Queen’s University Belfast have generously given their time and expertise to help facilitate and contribute to this project.



A photo of an empty side-by-side bike stationary on a pathway leading into a wood: taken at an event Niall Shannon delivered with FAAB Scotland to explore the access issues experienced by disabled people on greenways.



2 Objectives

In Northern Ireland, life expectancy is increasing, contributing to the growth of the population of older people (statistics suggest that by mid-2028, people aged 64 and over will exceed the number of children ¹), raising the concern of how people can age in a healthy and active way. Research and policy-making has been undertaken to better understand and address this issue: the Northern Ireland Government is implementing its Active Ageing Strategy with the Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership, set up to ensure Belfast is an age-friendly city, and Belfast was designated as a “Healthy City” in the WHO European Network over thirty years ago. Many more projects are continuing work in this area and we aim to contribute ideas and evidence to this existing pool of information and research.

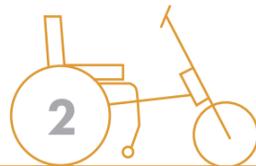
Likewise, projects and research to help improve the accessibility of outdoor places for people with disabilities are being carried out across Northern Ireland. The *DSNI Accessible Outdoor Places Design Guidelines* ² published in 2021 was created in response to the increasing demand from people with disabilities in Northern Ireland for accessible outdoor spaces for exercise and recreation. Many outdoor areas, including urban and rural green and blue spaces, remain challenging and at times largely inaccessible to people with disabilities due to various barriers such as poorly designed external pathways, inaccessible gates and stiles, and a lack of accessible parking, toilets, and other essential amenities. DSNI, along with other parties such as the Access and Inclusion Project at Derry City and Strabane District Council along with the Mae Murray Foundation are working to address these issues to improve the experience of outdoor spaces for people with disabilities (such as through the production of the *Adapt my Play Guide and Toolkit* ³) to allow them to improve their health and well-being and to provide them with the opportunity to participate in all aspects of life.

Given the ageing population and the projected urbanisation trend - with nearly 70% of the world’s population expected to reside in cities by 2050 - it is crucial to ensure that people with disabilities and older people have fully inclusive access to green and blue spaces ⁴ that cater to their needs, through good urban design.



An illustration of green and blue space

1. Cruise, S. and Kee, F. (eds.) (November 2017) *Early key findings from a study of older people in Northern Ireland, The NICOLA Study*. rep. Available at: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/NICOLA/FileStore/Fileupload,783215,en.pdf> (Accessed: 30 April 2024).
2. Disability Sport Northern Ireland & Public Health Agency (September 2021) *DSNI Accessible Outdoor Places Design Guidelines*. Available at: <http://www.dsni.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Guide-5-Accessible-Outdoor-Places-Design-Guidelines.pdf>
3. Mae Murray Foundation and Playboard NI (February 2024) *Adapt my Play Guide and Toolkit*. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ftpYCZNhDbuSLqmUACoQeFRZD2R6VqXn/view?pli=1> (Accessed: 09 May 2024).
4. Green space refers to any natural area containing trees, grass, or other green vegetation and blue spaces are any natural space that contains water.



2 Objectives

Green and blue spaces are known to improve physical and mental health and wellbeing, and provide social, environmental and economic benefits, as is already evidenced along the Connswater Community Greenway. The Greenway actively benefits older people and people with disabilities by encouraging physical activity and health, enhancing social inclusion and wellbeing, providing contact with nature, and promoting educational and volunteering opportunities. It contributes to aspects of community life that need to be considered to support citizens to age well, as are laid out in the *Age-Friendly Belfast Plan 2023-2027*⁵. Not only this, but the Greenway addresses climate-related challenges through its green infrastructure, biodiversity, and sustainable transportation linkages, evidenced in the *Climate and Nature Action: A Vision for the Connswater Community Greenway*⁶ report by the Paul Hogarth Company.

While it is clear that accessibility and inclusion were thoughtfully considered in the initial design of the Connswater Community Greenway (and indeed C.S. Lewis Square was included in *MAG Principles: Inclusive Places*⁷ as a case study of inclusive civic design); the range of accessibility issues across Belfast is complex and growing, with an ageing and increasingly diverse population.

By documenting the lived experience of older people and people with disabilities as they use the Connswater Community Greenway, this investigation seeks to provide evidence which will help to support the work of EastSide Greenways to promote further changes and updates to improve access to this Greenway.

5. Belfast Health Development Unit, (2023). *Age-Friendly Plan 2023-2027*. Available at: <https://www.makinglifebettertogether.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Age-Friendly-Plan-2023-2027.pdf> (Accessed 12 June 2024).

6. The Paul Hogarth Company (2023). *Climate and Nature Action: A Vision for the Connswater Community Greenway*. Available at: <https://www.eastsidegreenways.com/reports-and-research/>. A report accessing the Connswater Community Greenway through the lens of climate resilience, adaptation, nature conservation and self sustainability.

7. Department for Communities, (2023). *MAG Principles: Inclusive Places*. Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-mag-principles-inclusive-places.pdf> (Accessed 12 June 2024).



A photo of a group of people walking along the Connswater Community Greenway, towards Connswater Shopping Centre.



3 Community Involvement

3.1 Engagement Process

Engagement from a range of charities and organisations was facilitated throughout this study. Insights and feedback were sought from local organisations and the public around how accessible and inclusive the Connswater Community Greenway currently is and how it could be improved. Including people with disabilities, those with academic expertise, and those who work on a daily basis with older people in the initial research was crucial for gaining authentic insights and ensuring the relevance and accuracy of both the proposed engagement and the findings.

The range of engagement methods employed sought to ensure that many voices and perspectives could be heard and represented in the findings and recommendations ultimately put forward. The following methods were used, and are outlined in further detail in the sections that follow:

- Stakeholder Focus Groups
- Public Survey
- Wheel and Walkshop
- Report Feedback Webinar



A photograph of the Connswater Community Greenway



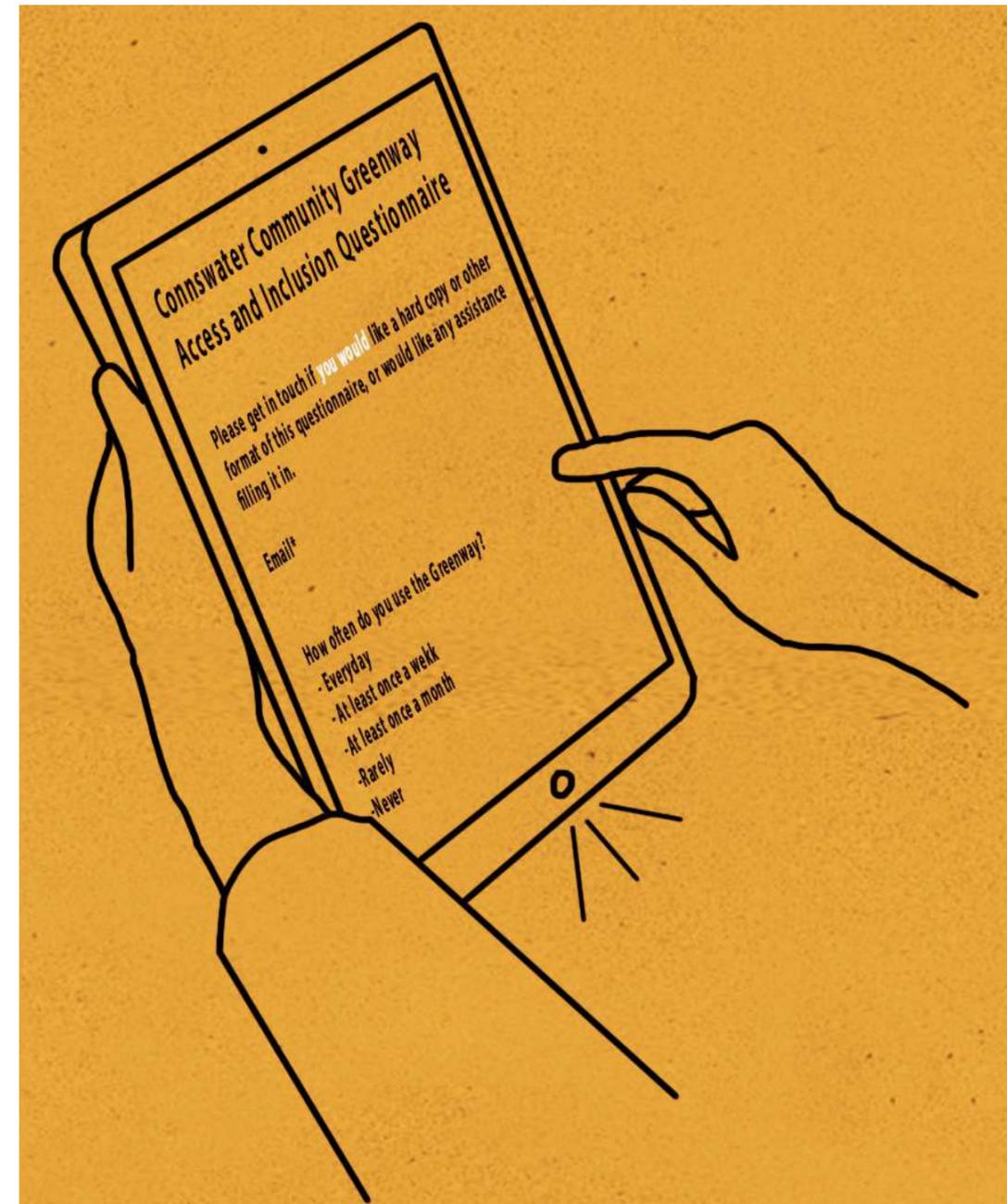
3 Community Involvement

3.2 Stakeholder Focus Groups

The team identified and reached out to thirty organisations and charities, and two further individuals with relevant expertise related to accessibility and blue/green spaces. In particular, groups representing disabled people and older people were targeted, both locally and nationally.

3.3 Public Survey

A short online public survey was developed by the team and circulated to partner groups, shared on social media and made available through the EastSide Greenways website to engage the public. Advice was sought from relevant focus group participants around how to optimise the accessibility of the survey, and as a result hard copies as well as screen-reader compatible versions of the questionnaire were also made available, along with the offer of assistance to complete the questionnaire for anyone who needed it. A random prize draw of any entrants who provided their contact details was held, offering prizes donated by local businesses, as an incentive for completing the survey as well as a way to raise awareness about the project within the local business community.



An illustration of a person holding an iPad, listening to a screen reader as it reads out the public survey questions.



3 Community Involvement

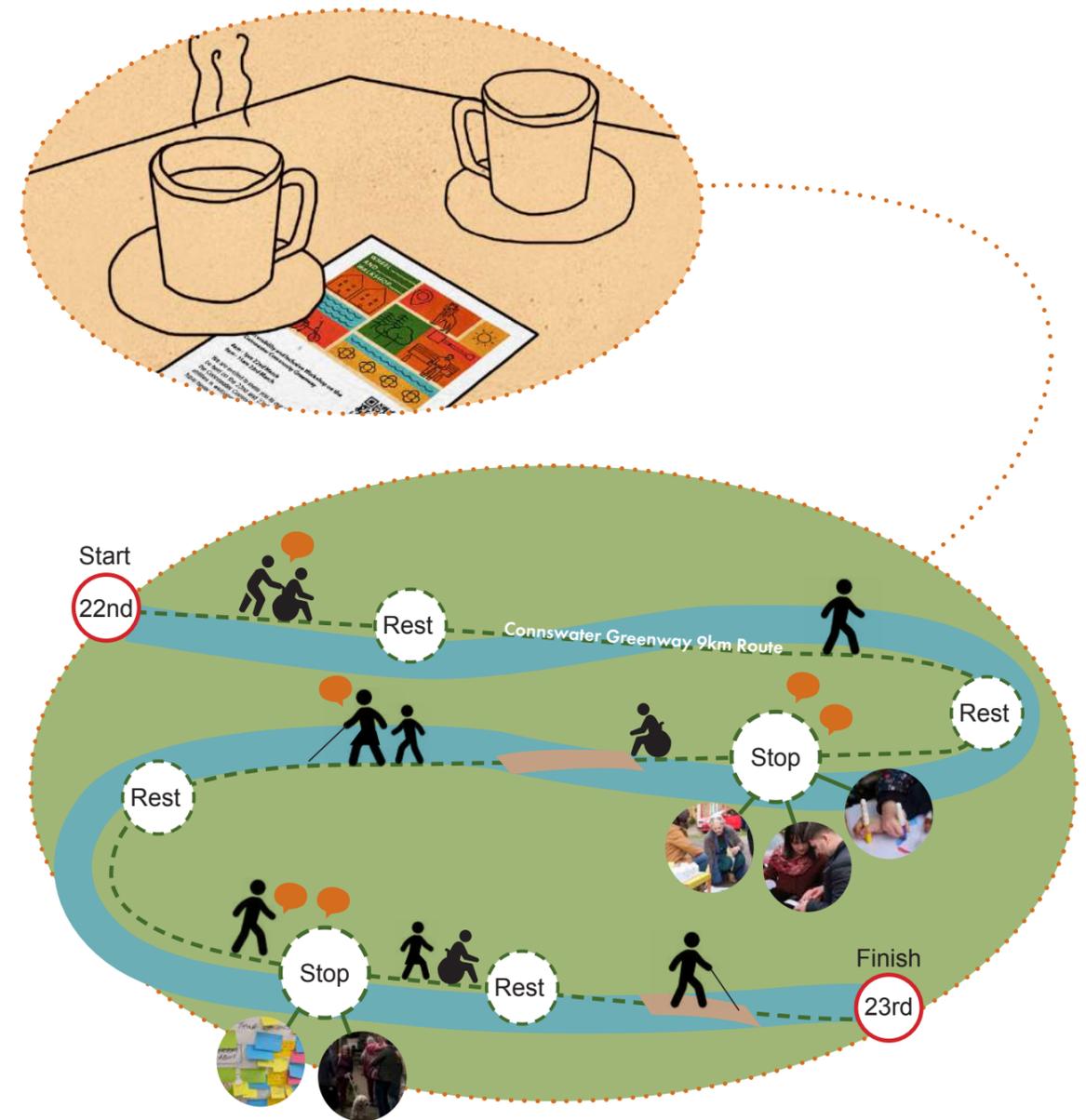
3.4 Wheel and Walkshop

Following focus groups and distribution of the public survey, the team organised a workshop that would invite participants to navigate the full length of the Connswater Community Greenway, making and sharing observations along the way. This was entitled a 'Wheel and Walkshop' with a range of mobility transportation, support, rest stops, refreshments and a changing places toilet provided. In her book *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit describes walking as 'a mode of making the world as well as being in it.'⁸ Walking with others is an important part of the methodology of the project, and is used frequently in practice at Studio idir, where discursive, interactive walking tours have been employed and theoretically explored, where participants act as both guides and guided, as ways to provoke, observe, listen, ask difficult questions, and learn about a place, one to one and with larger groups.

In order to promote the event and encourage wide participation, the team designed and distributed one hundred fliers across local businesses and partner groups in the area to invite participation in the 'Wheel and Walkshop', and shared online graphics with partner groups which could be uploaded onto social media channels to advertise the event. A QR code linked to additional information online which was hosted on the EastSide Greenways website.

The engagement consisted of walking or wheeling a linear route along the Connswater Community Greenway, split into sections of between 1-1.5km in length, with rest stops provided at the end of each section at more easily accessed points where some car parking was available. Chalk was provided, to allow participants to make temporary markings of their observations along the Connswater Community Greenway, and these were documented via photography. A dictaphone was used to record the discussion for the full length of the route walked with the attendees from the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB).

8. Solnit, R. (2022) *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Granta



An illustration of the invitation flyer to the Wheel and Walkshop sitting on a table next to two teacups, connected to another illustration of the Wheel and Workshop event.

3 Community Involvement

3.4 Wheel and Walkshop Continued

A group of volunteers was organised to facilitate four rest stops along the route travelled across the two day workshop; three rest stops on Friday and one rest stop on Saturday. Gazebos were provided to temporarily provide shelter to the volunteer team and participants, and refreshments were freely provided to everyone, including any interested passersby. Chairs were temporarily set up to allow participants to rest throughout the walk, as well as to allow anyone who could not attend the travelling group to engage with the workshop materials at a stationary point.

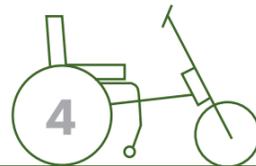
Inherent to the workshop methodology was the removal of barriers that might prevent engagement. Mae Murray Foundation promote and advocate for dignified toileting for all. Importantly, the decision was therefore made to provide a Changing Places Toilet via a portable 'Access-o-loo' van at C.S.Lewis Square for the duration of the workshop on Friday. Likewise two wheelchairs, one each from Disability Sport NI and Mae Murray Foundation, were requested and generously provided, to enable participation of members of Orchardville with the workshop.



A photo of poster materials, pens and biscuits laid out on a table outside in the sunshine.



A photo of three different types of wheelchairs and a van containing a changing places toilet, located outside in C.S. Lewis Square.



4 Engagement Findings

4.1 Summary of Engagement

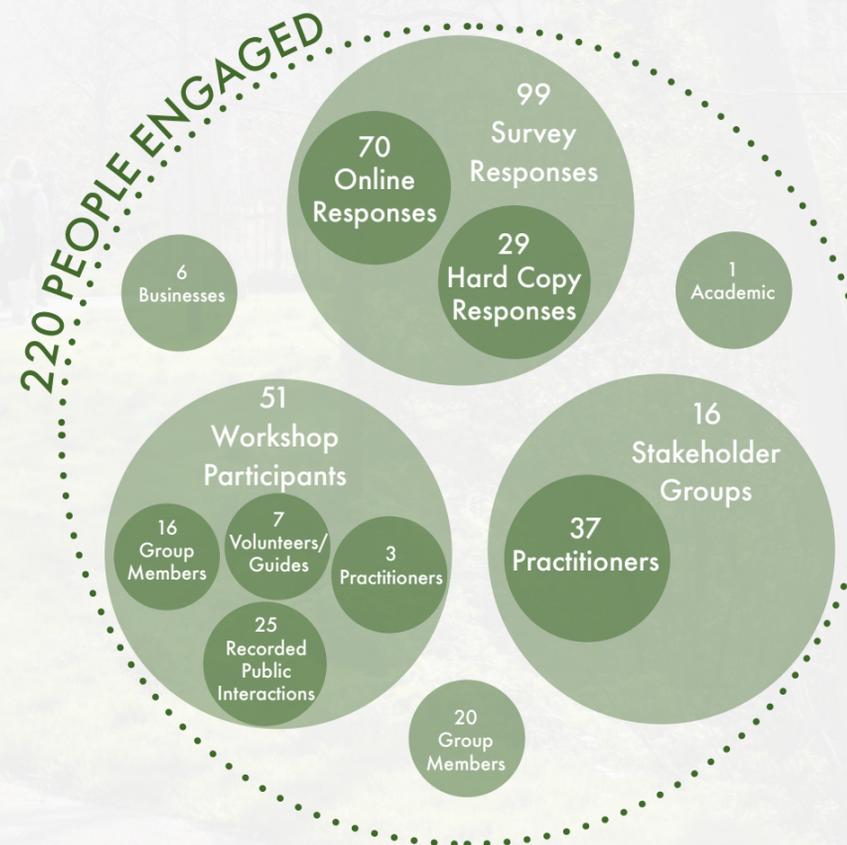
Approximately two-hundred and twenty people were engaged throughout the research process. Thirty-seven individuals working for partner groups; guides and volunteers from across sixteen groups; and one individual with relevant expertise, responded and engaged with the research via online focus groups, telephone conversations, and in some cases sharing the survey and attending the Wheel and Walkshop. Sixteen members from engaged groups attended the Wheel and Walkshop alongside three group organisers and seven guides/volunteers, and approximately twenty-five other members of the public were also engaged throughout the workshop. Ninety-nine public survey responses were collected; seventy responses were submitted via the online survey, and twenty-nine responses were completed on hard copies. Twenty members of three groups were also engaged prior to the Wheel and Walkshop through team visits and walks, and eight businesses were contacted and invited to participate by helping with advertisement of the workshop and providing prizes.

Dr. Sarah Bell, Senior Lecturer in Health Geography at the European Centre for Environment and Human Health (ECEHH) at the University of Exeter and co-investigator with the GroundsWell Consortium, was also consulted as an academic with relevant expertise, commenting largely on tools and formatting which could be appropriately used to increase the accessibility of the public survey and the workshop event.

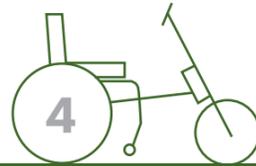
During the Wheel and Walkshop, the team walked and spoke with members from three charitable organisations, as well as members of the public. Orchardville, RNIB and Mae Murray Foundation each organised participants to engage with the workshop on Friday, and on Saturday the workshop times aligned with Park Run in Orangefield Park. The engagement was documented via photography and audio recording. The team had also prepared a booklet of maps, detailing the linear route to be taken. These maps were provided to each volunteer team member, to mark and note any areas or items causing accessibility barriers along the route and to note any comments made by participants.

Across the many conversations had throughout each of the engagement events, a number of recurring themes and comments were made in relation to the accessibility and inclusion of the Connswater Community Greenway. In particular, the Wheel and Walkshop, where we shared direct experience of the Greenway, brought up thoughtful commentary on some accessibility and inclusion issues not already anticipated. This brought home the value of being present in a place with people to gain a better understanding of their lived experience; as artist Thomas Hirschorn put it, through 'my presence and my production [...] I can create involvement, implication, exchange, dialogue, confrontation, contact!' ⁹

9. Hirschhorn, T. (2022) *The Way Out, Out, Out*. Graz: Steirischer Herbst



A diagram showing who engaged with the Wheel and Walkshop

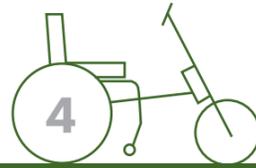


4 Engagement Findings

4.2 Engaged Stakeholder Groups



A collage of logos from organisations and charities that engaged with the research.



4 Engagement Findings

4.3 Wheel and Walkshop Photographs



A photo of a man on a mobility scooter and a woman pushing a bicycle along the Connswater Community Greenway, talking to each other.



A photo of a group of women standing outside, being served tea and coffee at C.S. Lewis Square.



A photo of a group of people walking along the Connswater Community Greenway while talking to each other.



A photo of a group of people and a guide-dog standing underneath and around a gazebo which is set up outside along the Connswater Community Greenway.



A photo of colourful post-it-notes with hand-written comments on them.

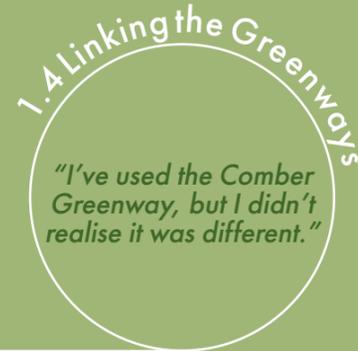


A photo of a group of people standing outside next to a gazebo along the Connswater Community Greenway.

4 Engagement Findings

Summary

1. Natural and Physical Environment



2. Infrastructure



3. User Experience



4. Shared Greenway



4 Engagement Findings

1. Natural and Physical Environment

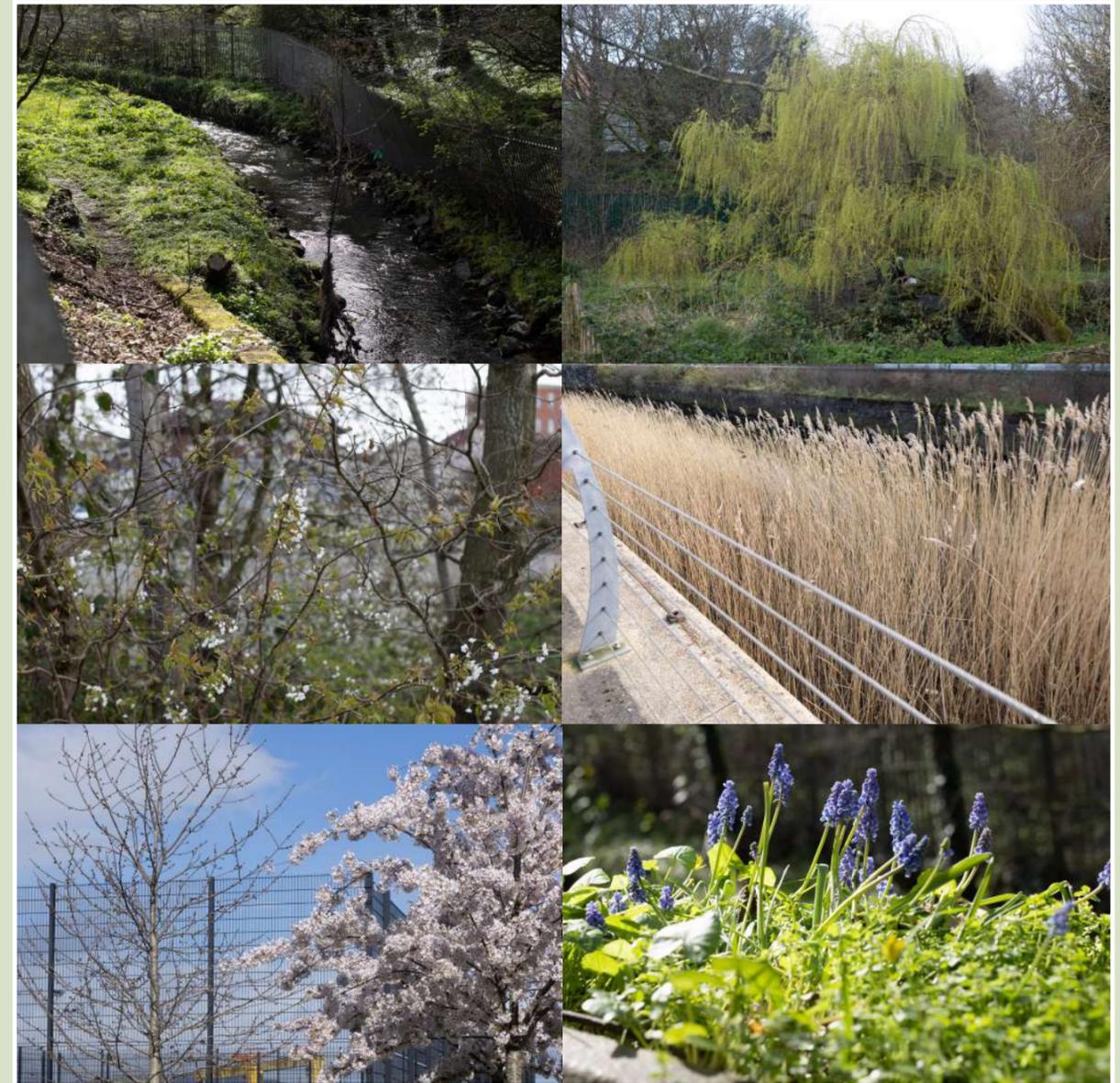
1.1 Interactions with Nature

Positive reactions and comments were noted about the Connswater Community Greenway across all methods of engagement, with project officers and organisers of local partner groups reporting their current use of the Greenway with their members. Positive comments recorded from walking alongside the RNIB, as well as in response to the survey question; ‘What do you like about the Greenway?’ mostly related to enjoyable experiences and interactions with the natural environment.

“I find everyone very social and friendly. Great exercise.”

“It’s a beautiful green space in the centre of East that is easily accessible.”

“I like the fact that there is so much wildlife to see. I think the greenway is a valuable resource for the community and all to enjoy.”



A collage of photos showing trees and plants along the Greenway.

4 Engagement Findings

1. Natural and Physical Environment, Continued

1.2 Planting

A litter pick was happening along the Connswater Community Greenway at the same time as the workshop, and some participants of the walk noted positively that they themselves had been part of similar events, which happen frequently within the annual programme on the Greenway, with a diverse range of participants and groups. On a litter pick elsewhere along a Greenway in Belfast, a team member contributed to the maintenance of the existing grass and planting along the route, noting the number of volunteers and time required to make an impact along the pathway, but also seeing the contribution that maintaining the existing environment made to the overall enjoyment of the natural landscape along the path.

The presence of intrusive planting or thorns which had overgrown onto the Connswater Community Greenway path was noted by a member of the RNIB group with a visual impairment as a potential danger, and another group member expanded on this point, explaining how overhanging plants and trees could also be dangerous above the path level, as they can't be detected by a long cane, but could cause physical harm. Participants suggested maintenance or removal of potentially dangerous planting from the Greenway.



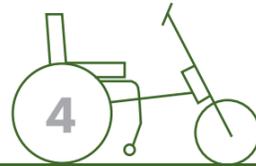
A photograph of a man and a woman in high-vis jackets, picking up litter along the Greenway path.



A photograph of a group of people standing in high-vis jackets, holding tools, with bags of litter at their feet that they have collected from along the Greenway.



A photograph of planting reaching over onto the Greenway at head-height.



4 Engagement Findings

1. Natural and Physical Environment, Continued

1.3 Flooding

The fact that the Connswater Community Greenway path floods was commented on in the Orangefield Park part of the Greenway Route. It was noted as a potential barrier to accessing certain routes along the Greenway for both disabled and non-disabled people. It was also noted however that parts of the Connswater Community Greenway have been designed to flood, as an innovative approach to flood risk management for neighbouring residential areas.

A QR code was found on some Connswater Community Greenway signs along Orangefield Park, with the signs indicating that following the QR link would lead to online help with finding an alternative route in the event of flooding. A team member tested the QR link out and found that the online information asked that individuals should seek their own alternative route.

1.4 Linking the Greenways

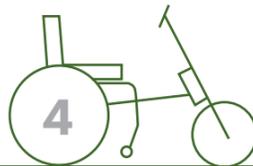
A team member was invited to join groups on the Connswater Community Greenway for activities prior to the workshop: a gentle walk with Engage with Age and a litter pick with Sustrans. On both occasions the organised groups turned out to be meeting on the Comber Greenway. Generally there appears to be a mis-understanding of the two separate greenway names and routes amongst the public, confirmed throughout the workshop as individuals discussed their experiences on what they thought was Connswater Community Greenway, but in fact often referred to locations along the Comber Greenway, such as one participant from Engage with Age stating that they usually join the Greenway at the steps along North Road (which lead to the Comber Greenway).



A photograph of Orangefield Park showing puddles along the edge of the paths.

“I’ve used the Comber Greenway, but I didn’t realise it was different.”

“It’s a bit confusing because people get the two of them mixed up”



4 Engagement Findings

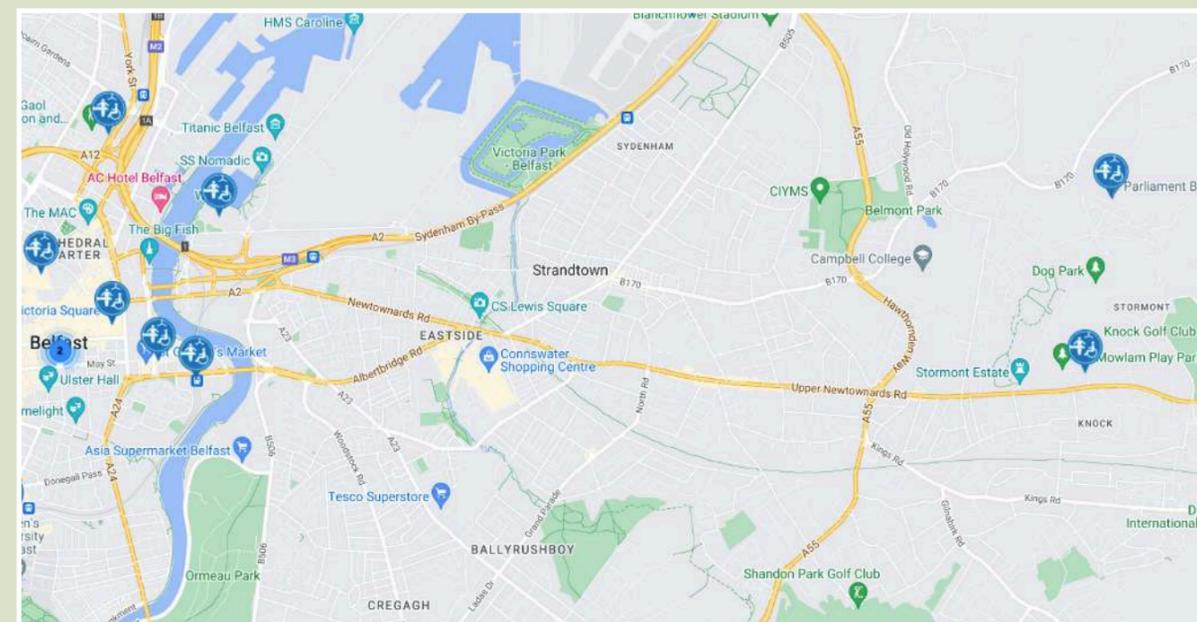
2. Infrastructure

2.1 Toilets

In terms of how the Connswater Community Greenway could be improved, responses most commonly focused on toilet facilities. A lack of toilets along the Connswater Community Greenway was an anticipated barrier to being able to stay on the path for a longer period of time and was discussed in depth at a number of focus groups by project officers and organisers from partner groups who need to organise events for their members around toilet provision. Questions and comments were also made about the barriers to building more toilets, with issues of funding and maintenance raised. Examples were given of new public toilets being broken due to vandalism in other green spaces and parks, and of councillors currently seeking more funding for more toilets in green spaces across Belfast (Woodvale Park and Falls park in particular). Anecdotes were also shared by attendees of the Engage with Age gentle walk, prompted by their use of a toilet at the Walkway Community Centre, explaining their experiences of using toilets along greenways, and their preferred public toilets in the city. Notably in the public survey, people with disabilities were more than twice as likely to mention toilets as a facility they use along the Connswater Community Greenway, as non-disabled people (18% vs 8%), while older people also referenced in person the need for toilets in multiple locations to accommodate frequent and/or urgent requirements.

A lack of Changing Places Toilets on the Connswater Community Greenway was also discussed at a focus group, indicating that it is a barrier to people with disabilities to attending events and activities. A lack of any nearby Changing Places Toilet to the Connswater Community Greenway was also highlighted, as illustrated via the Changing Places Toilets map.

An Access-o-loo van was hired for one day of the workshop, containing a temporary Changing Places Toilet. Team members sought advice from partner organisations on the location of the van, wanting to ensure it would be accessible, and not take up any space required for disabled parking.



A screenshot of a google map showing the nearest Changing Places Toilets to the Connswater Community Greenway located at Stormont Estate or Lanyon Place Train Station.

A Changing Places Toilet describes a fully accessible toilet with a height adjustable changing bench, a hoisting system, a peninsular toilet, and enough space for the disabled person, his/her wheelchair and two carers. It is designed to meet the needs and comfort of all users.

An Accessible Toilet describes a toilet designed to meet the majority of needs of independent wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments, however standard accessible toilets do not meet the needs of all people with a disability.



A photograph of the Access-o-Loo van parked at the C.S. Lewis Square.

4 Engagement Findings

2 Infrastructure, Continued

2.2 Signposts

Another key observation noted during the Wheel and Workshop was the formatting of existing signposts. These were observed to be a significant barrier to independent way-finding along the Connswater Community Greenway for those who are visually impaired as they were often not seen or noticed from a distance, and their content was unreadable due to the size, colour and location of the writing, and dirt and graffiti obstructing the writing. Several constructive suggestions were made by workshop participants as to how this could be addressed.

Improving signage so that it would be more dementia friendly was also suggested in the report feedback webinar as another positive way to make the Connswater Community Greenway more accessible.

2.3 Wayfinding Markers

The pace of the workshop was set by participants to enable conversations to happen simultaneously, and was led, when appropriate and safe, by the participants themselves, to encourage commentary on way-finding. Existing visual way-finding markers such as kerb treatments and ground surfaces were noted as being very (perhaps too) subtle throughout the Wheel and Walkshop - indeed many participants said they had not been aware that the sandstone paving was an indicator of the Connswater Community Greenway until team members pointed it out.

“If you had a black background with white writing on it, I think it would be easier.”

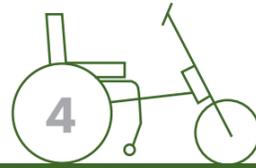
“You could just have the sign written on the ground in bright blue or something to tell you where to go.”



A photo of a signpost along the Connswater Community Greenway which is covered in dirt and moss.



A photo of a way finding marker on a kerb edge of a footpath which says 'Greenway.'



4 Engagement Findings

2. Infrastructure, Continued

2.4 Benches/Shelter

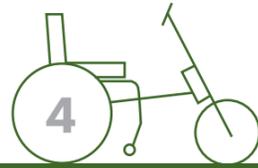
Participants of the initial focus groups had anticipated that a need for more benches along the Connswater Community Greenway might be expressed during the workshop, to allow older people and disabled people to both rest and socialise, potentially allowing them to stay on the Greenway for longer periods of time. Throughout the Wheel and Walkshop however there was, in fact, positive recognition (and use made) of the benches that were already provided, with one participant stopping to rest on an existing bench, allowing her to continue to progress further along the route than she had originally anticipated. Orangefield Park, and the section along Marsh Wiggle Way in particular was commended by the team during the workshop for the frequency of benches along this more challenging and steep route, and the benches were used frequently by a team member on a cycle route along Orangefield Park.

Some older people made known their willingness to use the Greenway in all weather conditions while out walking as part of the Engage with Age Gentle Walk, (and which they demonstrated as rain began to fall in the second half of the walk) while project officers and organisers of partner groups shared that shelters would be beneficial along the Greenway, as some of their members struggle with the weather. It is worth noting that the weather was mixed on the day of the Wheel and Walkshop, with both sunshine and rain. Despite the wet weather experienced, participants were keen to continue with the workshop, and made no comments on a desire for taking shelter or the presence/lack of shelter along the Connswater Community Greenway.

Anecdotes however were shared in focus groups and during the workshop about the potential anti-social behaviour that shelters and benches may invite along the Connswater Community Greenway. Animated discussions were held offering mixed viewpoints as to how the benefits that shelters may provide for many people, including older people and people with disabilities, could out-weigh the anticipated negative impact of anti-social behaviour from a small group of individuals. One practitioner shared the example of Sustrans Scotland inviting community organisations to decorate benches along a green pathway in Renfrewshire in Scotland as a positive way to invite greater sense of ownership of the path by the locals who use it, while another project officer suggested the positive impact that shelters would have in allowing larger groups and organisations to more easily use the Connswater Community Greenway.



A photograph of a metal bench along the Connswater Community Greenway.



4 Engagement Findings

2. Infrastructure, Continued

2.5 Play Parks

Flora Street and Orangefield Parks were both found to be closed with padlocks on the workshop days: while perhaps accessible to anyone who was able and wanted to jump over the surrounding fence, a member of Mae Murray Foundation noted that it would be inaccessible to anyone in a wheelchair. The number of pieces of accessible equipment was also noted across all three play parks (Victoria, Flora Street and Orangefield), as only 2 or 3 pieces in each park, with a participant commenting that this doesn't provide variety or much choice. High fencing around a MUGA (Multi-Use Games Area) at Victoria Park was also commented on as potentially creating an unsafe space. A comment from the report feedback webinar also highlighted that play parks need to be looked at holistically, not just in terms of play equipment:

“A play park can have those two-to three pieces of equipment there, but that doesn't make it an accessible inclusive play park - if we don't have the parking facilities, if we don't have the changing places toilet. It has to be looked at as whole picture.”

2.6 Physical barriers

Bollards and bins were noted along the route of the workshop as inconvenient to get around for those with accessible equipment such as wheelchairs or long canes. A member of the RNIB had to be warned by a guide about the presence of a bollard in the middle of the pathway so that she wouldn't walk into it.

The entrance from the Beersbridge Road into The Hollow was also described as being narrow and therefore quite difficult to spot from the roadway and difficult to navigate if encountering anyone else wanting to pass along the path at the same time.



A photograph of the Friendship Play Park along the Connswater Community Greenway.



A photograph of high fencing surrounding the MUGA at Victoria Park.



A photograph of a bollard in the middle of a narrow path.

4 Engagement Findings

3. User Experience

3.1 Assistance

In the public survey, when asked to consider the prospect of using the Connswater Community Greenway alone during the day, people with disabilities were less than a third as confident as those without disabilities to do so. Assistance as well as equipment and resources required in order to make the Connswater Community Greenway more accessible was noted across all methods of engagement. This was particularly evident on the first day of the Wheel and Walkshop, which took place by the assistance of multiple guides, volunteers, a guide dog, wheelchairs, long canes, and the temporary Changing Places Toilet.

One older person who used the all-terrain chair, borrowed from Mae Murray Foundation, although initially hesitant about sitting in an unfamiliar type of chair not used before, concluded that she was very comfortable throughout her time at the Wheel and Walkshop.

One member of the public contacted the number provided on the Wheel and Walkshop invitation flyer to request assistance in getting from his home in Bangor to the C.S. Lewis Square, to be able to partake in some of the workshop. This individual independently organised a mobility scooter for himself via an independent and un-associated business, and requested help with understanding the public transport links to get to the venue.

Members of the RNIB were observed to require the help of guides to navigate the Connswater Community Greenway path, in particular where the path intersects public roads at the Beersbridge Road, Castlereagh Road and Ladas Drive.

These findings suggests that support/company has a significant impact on disabled people’s confidence and ability to use the Connswater Community Greenway, and this was echoed in some comments made during the Wheel and Walkshop.



A photograph of a volunteer pushing a woman in an all-terrain wheelchair along the Connswater Community Greenway.



A photograph of an older man using a long cane walking alongside a female guide.

“I don’t think I could do this on my own, I would get lost quite easily.”

“I’m a wheelchair user and feel vulnerable and feel I need someone with me for help and support.”

4 Engagement Findings

3. User Experience, Continued

3.2 Heritage Information

The Connswater Community Greenway is populated with signage and information boards relating to the heritage of the local area. Some participants shared additional local knowledge, such as stories of the small Con O’Neill bridge in the Hollow being one of the oldest stone structures in Belfast. This was an element of the Connswater Community Greenway that was positively experienced during the Wheel and Walkshop with some individuals making a point of stopping and reading the various signs and information throughout.

“It’s nice to learn a bit about where you are.”

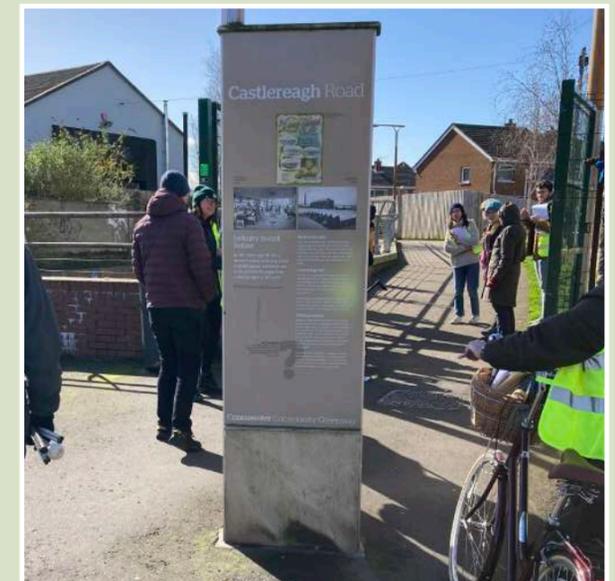
3.3 Programmes and Events

Other organisational barriers to accessing the Connswater Community Greenway were noted, in particular, by project officers and organisers of partner groups during the online focus meetings; such as the financial implications of hiring transport or equipment, or the burden on time and resources to prepare risk assessments for attending events or organising activities along the Connswater Community Greenway. Sharing of equipment and resources was welcomed between organisation facilitators on the day of the Wheel and Workshop and requests were made to be able to share equipment for future opportunities.

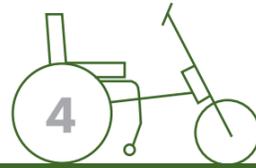
A lack of disabled parking provision was commented on by participants of the workshop, as well as permanent Changing Places Toilets, with both these facilities cited as barriers to people with disabilities from attending events.



A photograph of a small sign for Daddy Winker’s Lane on grass alongside the pathway of the Connswater Community Greenway.



A photograph of a group of people on foot and with bicycles, reading a tall signpost for the Castlereagh Road on the Connswater Community Greenway.



4 Engagement Findings

3. User Experience, Continued

3.4 Desire Lines

Several desire lines connecting the Connswater Community Greenway to other existing public pathways, usually across grass embankments, were documented throughout the workshop. Conversation with one member of the public was also initiated by a team member after spotting her crossing an existing and obviously well-used desire line with her daughter who was in a wheelchair.

3.5 Litter

Litter and dog fouling were frequently cited as an area for Connswater Community Greenway improvement and a barrier to accessibility and inclusion in the public survey. Group members of RNIB, as well as a member of the public with a disability, each explained how dog foul can get onto equipment used by people with disabilities, such as long canes or wheelchairs, prompted by the presence of dog foul noted along the Connswater Community Greenway throughout the Wheel and Walkshop.

3.6 Noise

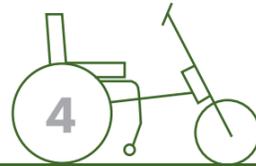
Noise pollution at Victoria Park from aeroplanes at Belfast City Airport was commented on, as well as traffic noise pollution at C.S. Lewis square and the intersection of the Connswater Community Greenway with the Beersbridge Road, which, at times throughout the workshop, made navigating the Greenway with a larger group of people, some of whom had hearing loss, difficult to do. Comments were also made within the report feedback webinar about noise being difficult for some people with neurodiversity along the Connswater Community Greenway, and suggestions were made about the dual-purpose that new shelters could take, providing not only shelter from weather, but also from noise.



A photograph of a muddy path or 'desire line' cutting across a bank of grass, connecting the Connswater Community Greenway path to another public path.



A photograph of traffic on the Lower Newtownards Road next to the C.S. Lewis Square.



4 Engagement Findings

4. Shared Greenway

4.1 Shared Pathway

The fact that the Connswater Community Greenway is a shared path for pedestrians and cyclists was noted as contentious throughout all forms of engagement. Members of various groups of people with disabilities commented on being put-off by cyclists going too quickly, and shared experiences of encountering what they perceived as aggression from cyclists shouting or ringing their bells loudly.

This was also reflected in the public survey where women, over-60's and disabled people were all more likely to specifically mention cyclists preventing them from using the Connswater Community Greenway.

4.2 Bonfires

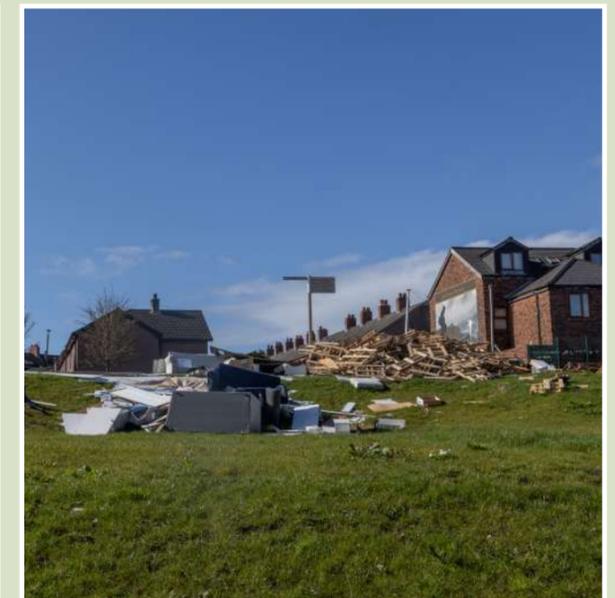
Bonfires were noted, in the public survey and in-person during the workshop, particularly on the second day in Orangefield Park by members of Park Run, as off-putting and potentially dangerous for some people with disabilities throughout the spring and summer when the Connswater Community Greenway could be more freely enjoyed in better weather. This is partly due to the debris they bring to the Connswater Community Greenway, causing potential obstruction and danger along the pathways, as well as the social isolation of sections of the community due to their presence.

"If I was out on my own, I think I might be worried about bikes coming towards me."

"I have had some disrespect from cyclists"



A photograph of a narrow entrance to the Connswater Community Greenway, with a man on a mobility scooter in the foreground, and a cyclist behind him on the path.



A photograph of debris gathered to create a bonfire, on an expanse of grass near a street of houses.



5 Recommendations

A full collation and review of comments and notes from the engagement, has singled out three key themes that inform the recommendations this report puts forward for improving accessibility and inclusion along the Connswater Community Greenway.

These recommendations are explained further in the following pages, and have been presented in relation to their ease of delivery in terms of time and budget, versus the scale of their potential impact.

Most importantly though, as encouraged in our report feedback webinar, we would like to emphasise the inclusion and involvement of people with disabilities, older people and stakeholders right from the start of the implementation of any of the recommendations.



A diagram showing the three key themes of the recommendations



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 1: Address User Conflict

The Connswater Community Greenway is designed as a shared space for pedestrians and cyclists and therefore accommodations should be made for all types of users. However, shared spaces have been recorded as disproportionately negatively impacting people with disabilities,¹⁰ as highlighted in the engagement findings.

To address this, EastSide Greenways can look to continue and improve upon their education of the public, in particular cyclists, about the experiences, needs and challenges faced by people with disabilities when navigating public spaces, while all users can be educated on how to be more considerate when using the Connswater Community Greenway.

10. IMTAC (April 2018) *Revised statement on shared space*. Available at: [https://www.imtac.org.uk/sites/imtac/files/media-files/Revised Shared Space statement \(Final Version April 18\).pdf](https://www.imtac.org.uk/sites/imtac/files/media-files/Revised%20Shared%20Space%20statement%20(Final%20Version%20April%2018).pdf) (Accessed: 09 May 2024).

Short Term Goals:

- a. **Include older people and people with disabilities in decision-making processes:** ensure their voices and perspectives are represented on issues directly affecting their use of the Connswater Community Greenway, in particular relating to any changes to the physical infrastructure of the pathway through the implementation of forums/boards.
- b. **Cycle training for children and adults:** develop the existing partnership with Sustrans to ensure awareness of other users while cycling on a shared pathway is emphasised in their training programme.



Illustrations showing a walking group and cycle training



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 1: Address User Conflict, Continued

Short Term Goals:

- c. **Host partners to educate and raise awareness:** existing programmes of events, fairs and festivals, as well as volunteering opportunities, walking groups and tours, all held along the Connswater Community Greenway, can allow charities, local organisations, and community members to share information during events. This will raise awareness of navigating the Greenway as a shared space that can be used equally by older people and people with disabilities as by anyone else.
- d. **Utilise and share existing technology and content to raise awareness and increase empathy and understanding of using the Greenway as a shared space:** apps exist to educate users about the lived experience of chronic illnesses and disabilities, such as the 'In my Shoes' app by Crohn's and Colitis UK, and Xplore Disability app by para-athlete Claire Buckle. Likewise, there is a wide range of social media content, such as Mae Murray Foundation Youth Panel Podcast, which educates through sharing about lived experience of disabilities and complex needs.



Illustrations showing an information stand and a person using a directions app



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 2: Facilitate Placemaking Opportunities

Placemaking has a large impact on the enjoyability and experience of the Greenway and was most referenced as a potential improvement along the Greenway that could create a better and more accessible experience. Resources such as the *DSNI Accessible Outdoor Places Design Guidelines*¹¹ and *Sustrans Guide to Getting Barriers Redesigned or Removed*¹² should be used and referenced for information and best practice when implementing recommendations in relation to external routes, amenities, physical barriers, way-finding, signs and information, and inclusive play.

11. Disability Sport Northern Ireland & Public Health Agency (September 2021) *DSNI Accessible Outdoor Places Design Guidelines*. Available at: <http://www.dsni.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Guide-5-Accessible-Outdoor-Places-Design-Guidelines.pdf>

12. Sustrans (2023) *Guide to getting barriers redesigned or removed*. Available at: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/about-us/paths-for-everyone/barriers-on-the-national-cycle-network/how-to-get-barriers-redesigned-or-removed/>

Short term goals:

- e. **Maintain and assess street furniture:** graffiti, weathering and dirt all contribute to signs and street furniture not functioning as they should and are detrimental to the experience and accessibility of the Connswater Community Greenway. Broadening volunteering programmes across community and stakeholder groups encourages investment in the condition of the Greenway and increases a sense of ownership. Street furniture should be assessed with reference to existing guides and considered for removal or redesign where creating barriers to physically accessing and enjoying the Connswater Community Greenway.
- f. **Monitor and provide for consistent access to play parks** along the length of the Connswater Community Greenway.



Illustrations showing graffiti cleaning and a well-maintained playground



5 Recommendations

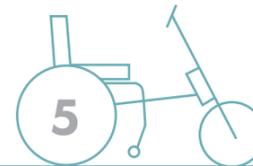
Key Theme 2: Facilitate Placemaking Opportunities, Continued

Mid term goals:

- g. **Create and improve wayfinding markers:** the existing path and street landscape currently provides subtly designed way-finding markers which could be made more obvious to all users of the Connswater Community Greenway, and in particular to people with disabilities. Higher colour contrast, as well as ground markings, tactile paths, and wording on the ground to better indicate directions, could improve way-finding, particularly at junctions where existing streets transect the Greenway path.
- h. **Reduce noise pollution:** investigate the use of planting as a means of improving noise pollution around C.S. Lewis Square and Victoria Park by contacting experts in public landscape design for advice and guidance.
- i. **Provide permanent Changing Places Toilets:** this will enable older people and people with disabilities to use the Connswater Community Greenway more frequently and for longer periods of time, as well as providing the opportunity to attend events and programmes along the Connswater Community Greenway, including people otherwise potentially excluded from using the Greenway.



Illustrations showing wayfinding markers, a man maintaining a hedge, and a permanent Changing Places Toilet



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 2: Facilitate Placemaking Opportunities, Continued

Long term goals:

- j. **Improve existing signs and branding:** increase colour contrast on signs, use larger font sizes and have more information available at eye level on sign boards along the Connswater Community Greenway. Carefully consider the use of braille or QR codes to link to audio guides, with direct input from visually impaired/blind users of the Connswater Community Greenway. Use contrasting colours on the existing streetscape so signs can be more easily spotted and read. Refer to guidance such as *Understanding how blind and partially sighted people get around*¹³ from the RNIB.
- k. **Vista across Marsh-Wiggle Way:** Optimise the viewpoint at the top of Marsh-Wiggle Way as it is the only section of the Connswater Community Greenway which enjoys an elevated viewpoint across Belfast. This could be made more of, to the better enjoyment of everyone, even those who are visually impaired, for whom, as Bell (2018) notes:

*'Elevated viewpoints are often accompanied by important non-visual sensations, particularly the sense of pleasure or perspective encountered through alternative qualities of air, sound and microclimate.'*¹⁴

13. RNIB, (2021). *Understanding how blind and partially sighted people get around*. Available at: https://media.rnib.org.uk/documents/Understanding_how_blind_or_partially_sighted_people_get_around_FINAL.docx

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Illustrations showing three greenway signs and people at the Marsh-Wiggle Way viewpoint



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 2: Facilitate Placemaking Opportunities, Continued

Long term goals:

- i. **Install more benches:** provide more benches at intervals along the length of the Greenway to allow rest for more people. Creating an ownership programme whereby businesses or stakeholder groups sponsor a bench may increase a sense of ownership and investment in maintaining the Connswater Community Greenway, as seen in the Sustrans Scotland community bench project in Renfrewshire.
- m. **Create areas for shelter in overlooked spaces:** allow somewhere to pause as a group as well as to shelter from the elements, allowing people to have a rest, wait out a rain shower and generally stay on the Greenway for longer. Shelters could also function to provide space for shelter from noise pollution.
- n. **Create an Inclusive Play Space:** In consultation with stakeholders, and in reference to Adapt my Play Guide and Toolkit ¹⁵, update the play parks along the Greenway to become either Accessible Play Spaces or more desirably, Inclusive Play Spaces, allowing for the highest level of engagement and participation from children with disabilities. This includes providing information about the facilities provided, well-designed accessible equipment and layout of the play space, and engaging with local transport providers to review accessible transport links.

15. Mae Murray Foundation and Playboard NI (February 2024) *Adapt my Play Guide and Toolkit*. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ftpYCZNhDbuSLqmUACoQeFRZD2R6VqXn/view?pli=1> (Accessed: 09 May 2024)



Illustrations showing new benches, a shelter on the greenway, and an Inclusive Play Space



5 Recommendations

Key Theme 3: Enable Collaborations, Continued

Short term goals:

- o. **Improve and update online accessible information** on the interactive map currently available on EastSide Greenways website. This will better highlight facilities which already exist. This information could be made more accessible by including images of facilities, as well as providing various formats of information such as large print, hard copy, compatibility with screen readers; and GoPro footage along the length of the Greenway made available on youtube with video chapters of sections of the Greenway highlighted, and subtitles provided.
- p. **Arrange temporary Changing Places Toilet facilities** for events and festivals, such as hiring an Access-o-loo van. This is relatively straight-forward and inexpensive to arrange, and comes with a member of staff to drive the vehicle, set it up and clean it between each use.



Illustrations showing a phone with accessible information and a temporary Changing Places Toilet

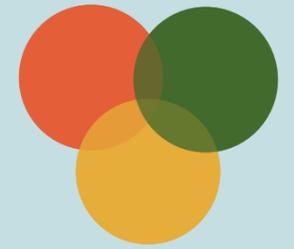


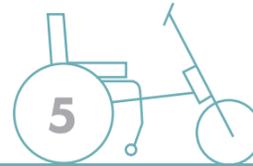
5 Recommendations

Key Theme 3: Enable Collaborations, Continued

Mid term goals:

- q. **Share resources:** create a resource library online that partners can contribute to, offering to share, and asking to borrow, anything from accessible equipment, to vehicles, technology, information, or even volunteers and assistants.
- r. **Engage and incentivise local businesses:** continue to develop the Go Greenway Champion offering in relation to accessible facilities. This Go Greenway initiative currently provides advertisements for businesses in return for financial support. This initiative could be widened to help address the lack of refreshments and facilities along the Greenway by providing advertisement for businesses on accessible guides online and in hard copy, particularly where accessible entrances and toilets are available, in exchange for discounted rates and allowing access to existing toilet facilities.
- s. **Create accessible day-trip guides:** create hard copy, free guides/route maps which can be circulated around local businesses and distributed in shops/cafes.
- t. **Connect to existing accessibility guides:** research the potential use of online resources such as AccessAble and Evan's Guide to provide accessibility information about the Greenway and provide reviews and information by previous users. Positive reviews on these guides may introduce more people to the Greenway via a platform they are familiar with.
- u. **Utilise existing technology:** connect to GPS-enabled navigation apps, to assist users in wayfinding along the Greenway. Ensure that these apps provide location-based information and are accessible to a wide range of users.



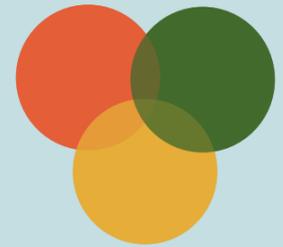


5 Recommendations

Key Theme 3: Enable Collaborations, Continued

Long term goals

- v. **Combine Connswater Community Greenway and Comber Greenway:** enable physical, managerial and human resources to be shared more efficiently. This would offer an expansion of branding opportunities to both Greenways.



An illustration showing people high-fiving beside a sign for the Comber Greenway



6 Report Feedback Webinar

A written draft of this report was shared with all engaged stakeholder groups, and an invitation was issued to attend a feedback webinar with the team, regarding the content of the report. Five charities and organisations were represented at the webinar:

1. Disability Sport NI
2. Mae Murray Foundation
3. Belfast City Council
4. East Belfast Community Development Agency (EBCDA)
5. AgeNI

Jacqueline O'Hagan (ESG) and Ruth Hunter (QUB) presented the project overview and Katie Stringer (Studio idir) presented the findings and recommendations from the draft report, and feedback welcomed from attendees.

In general, the findings and recommendations were well received, with comments made as to the accuracy and holistic overview of the project, in relation to discussions and research experienced outside of this project.

Comments throughout the webinar discussion focused on the need to include people at the early stages of implementation of recommendations; positive responses to the idea of creating community ownership of benches; the need for more toilets and the funding and maintenance restrictions of implementation; the importance of emphasising the whole-picture view required to create an inclusive play park; creating dementia-friendly signage; encouraging people to stay on the Connswater Community Greenway through more shelters, seats and accessible picnic tables to allow for more socialising; and referencing existing guideline documents already available.

"The key point from me is that the report very much highlighted the issues that I would...through my experience, come up [sic] time and time again."

DSNI

"there are thorough conversations reflected in this piece of work and its nice to see a piece of work focused on one space....it really gives you some specific and practical things"

Age NI

"It's good you're looking at all the details."

EBCDA

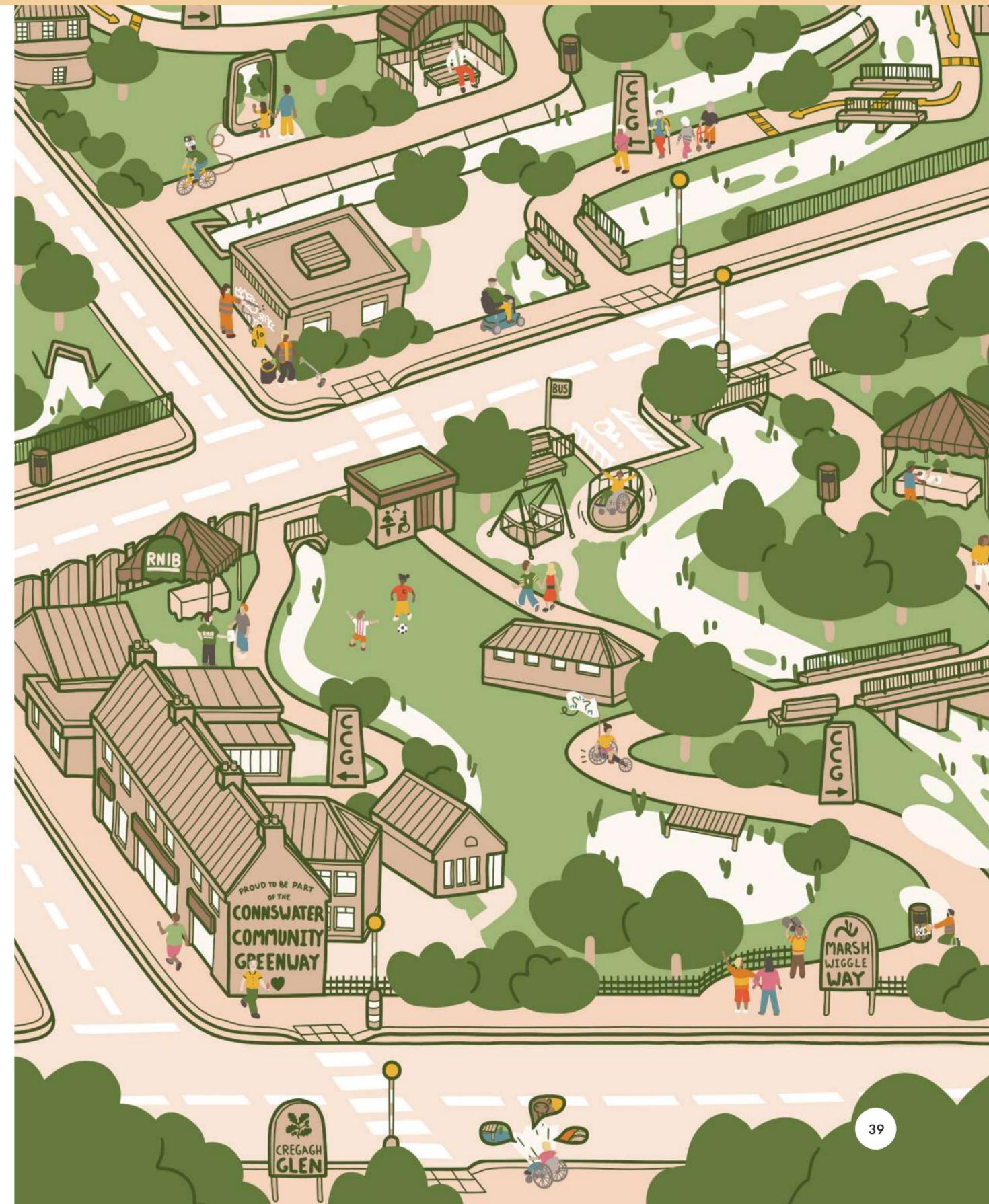


7 Summary

EastSide Greenways has, since its inception, facilitated a vibrant and enjoyable green and blue space along the Connswater Community Greenway, which is well used and enjoyed by the local community. Nonetheless, this research has demonstrated that there is even more potential for this space to be used to the enjoyment of more people, and for more reasons. People with disabilities and older people have been identified throughout this research as experiencing barriers to accessing the Connswater Community Greenway. The three key recommendation themes of addressing user conflict, enabling collaborations and facilitating placemaking opportunities have resulted from the findings of this research and are hoped to inform the next steps in improving accessibility and inclusion along the Connswater Community Greenway.

We envisage EastSide Greenways continuing to grow as a creative facilitator by implementing the recommendations put forward in this report; acting as a central hub of information, resource and organisation for partners and collaborators.

Thank you to everyone who gave their time, energy, thoughts and expertise to this research. We look forward to seeing how EastSide Greenways take the recommendations forward and seek ways to implement them in their ongoing journey towards making the Connswater Community Greenway as accessible and inclusive as it has the potential to be.



An illustration of the Connswater Community Greenway showing all recommendations



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4. Green space refers to any natural area containing trees, grass, or other green vegetation and blue spaces are any natural space that contains water.
5. Belfast Health Development Unit, (2023). *Age-Friendly Plan 2023-2027*. Available at: <https://www.makinglifebettertogether.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Age-Friendly-Plan-2023-2027.pdf> (Accessed 12 June 2024). The Plan evidences how Belfast is signed up to the World Health Organisations' Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities.
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