

Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project

Green Infrastructure Case Study

Creating the UK's first Active Travel Town

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The Connect 2 Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project shows how green infrastructure can enable a range of local authority departments to achieve their objectives through a single project. For Northumberland County Council, up-front investment in green infrastructure has paved the way for housing growth and the widespread adoption of sustainable modes of transport. Its Green Travel Project for Blyth demonstrates how a new cycle route can be sensitively integrated with the existing environment and motivate people to change their behaviour.

Snapshot

- **New walking and cycling infrastructure, combined with a community programme, is encouraging people not to rely on their car for local journeys**
- **Of the respondents that reported being aware of the new routes in Blyth, 67 per cent said that this had helped them to increase their level of physical activity**
- **Cycling has trumped public transport to become the preferred second choice for getting around after the car**
- **Statistics from the Cowpen New Town Report show an increase in people using the new riverside walking and cycling route from 14,712 people a year in 2010 to 56,175 people a year in 2011**



New walking and cycling routes are encouraging people not to rely on their cars

Key facts:

- Length of new cycle routes created: 15 miles
- Size of wader scrapes created: 0.25 ha
- Size of native hedge and scrub planting created: 400m
- Key partners for Connect 2 Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project include Northumberland County Council, Sustrans and Natural England

Key environmental functions:

- Supporting physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Improving connectivity to other green spaces
- Promoting opportunities for sustainable transport
- Enhancing and protecting the natural environment

Introduction

In 2009, the government allocated a Growth Fund to help facilitate development through the South East Northumberland Growth Point, which is part of a government initiative that aims to provide funding and support to communities wishing to pursue large-scale sustainable growth. Northumberland County Council Executive quickly agreed that the money should be directed at projects fitting three categories: green infrastructure, transport and highways, and housing delivery and sustainability innovation.



Prepared by Natural England

A total funding pot of £500,000 – spread over two years between 2009–2011 – was identified for green infrastructure projects. Later that year the Growth Point Partnership invited proposals for the development and delivery of high-quality green space projects.

Natural England was invited to be part of the assessment panel and to provide strategic advice on the implementation of the successful proposals. The panel identified three projects eligible for support, one of which was the Connect 2 Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project submitted by Northumberland County Council and Sustrans. The project was awarded an initial grant of £150,000 and a further grant of £300,000 to deliver the second phase of the project in 2010/11.

Map showing the location of Blyth Estuary



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Sustrans map of new and existing routes between Blyth and Bedlington

The Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project was to be part of a larger Connect 2 scheme – delivered by Sustrans with funding from the Big Lottery – to provide a comprehensive walking and cycling offer for communities centred around Blyth and neighbouring Bedlington. Key to this proposal was the re-routing of the National Cycle Network (NCN) 1 Coast and Castles route from South Beach in Blyth, through the town centre and then along Blyth Estuary to rejoin the existing NCN1 route at the A189 Spine road to Bedlington and beyond. This is part of Sustrans Connect 2 national project to bring cycling to the heart of UK communities and it is this that the Growth Fund grant helped to fund.

The project was awarded the grant because it demonstrated how green infrastructure could be used to help deliver other strategic priorities for the region. This included the regeneration of Blyth Town Centre and Blyth Estuary, as well as creating an attractive and active setting for a new technology park and new housing planned for the estuary area. The £450,000 of Growth Point Funding combined with a £950,000 contribution from Northumberland County Council made up £1.4m of funding for the Green Travel Project. Sustrans then added a further £2.84m to the scheme through its Connect 2 funding and its links with the Department for Transport's Schools and Communities grant programme. The result has been a highly accessible network of green infrastructure that has formed the basis of an action plan to improve the health and wellbeing of local people, provide sustainable travel options and opportunities for tourism, protect and enhance the landscape, and make the area more attractive to housing developers.

Using green infrastructure to create the UK's first Active Travel Town

The Blyth Estuary Green Travel Project contributes to the vision of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan to “deliver an access and rights of way network fit for the 21st century”. The walking and cycling route was completed in March 2012 and includes 10 miles of improved infrastructure linking schools and community facilities, together with five miles of riverside routes. This has created safer access to Blyth Town Centre for pedestrians and cyclists travelling from existing and planned new communities in the estuary area, including Bates Colliery, Hodgson's Road and Cowpen Quay. It has also improved access to green space for deprived communities, particularly those on the southern fringes of Blyth.

Monitoring devices to count pedestrians and cyclists have been installed at strategic locations to assess how well these new routes are being used. While it is too early in the process to provide comprehensive data, early indications are encouraging with statistics from the Cowpen New Town Report showing an increase from 14,712 people a year in 2010 to 56,175 people a year in 2011 using the riverside route. Furthermore, following the results of air quality monitoring by the council between 2010–2011, Defra agreed that air quality is now good enough to lift the Air Quality Management Area status in Blyth Town Centre, which had been in place since 2004.

The partnership with Sustrans has enabled Blyth to become the first 'Active Travel Town' in the UK. A dedicated team delivered programmes of activities supporting behavioural change within the community. This was aimed at increasing awareness of alternative, sustainable modes of transport and reducing the use of motor vehicles for shorter journeys to school, work and community facilities. In addition, Northumberland County Council has introduced the Go Smarter Northumberland Project, which is being supported in part by the Local Sustainable Transport Fund to encourage commuting via cycling, walking and public transport.

Survey results for 2012 suggest that the two programmes are helping Blyth live up to its new title. Of the respondents that reported being aware of the new routes in Blyth, 67 per cent said that this had helped them to increase their level of physical activity. Cycling usurped public transport to become the preferred second choice for getting around after the car, while walking rose two places to become the third preferred choice.

Stuart Balmer-Howieson, H&S Manager at Port of Blyth, has seen changes in the workplace too: “Now that there are new cycle routes around the area, it has enabled employees to ride safely to work. We now have people travelling by bike to work from more than 10 miles away. We have seen a number of employees change their lifestyle. Bike riding has proven to be a springboard to a better lifestyle.”

Bringing the NCN1 Coast and Castles route through the town centre and along the quayside and the south side of the River Blyth, has also attracted tourists to the area. Anecdotal evidence from local business owners indicates that, to date, this is having a positive effect. Nicola Mowbray, owner of the Ivy Café, said that the new cycle routes have had a really positive impact on business at the Ivy, especially since the Coast and Castles route now comes past its door. “We are picking up a lot of trade from cycle tourism and are now looking into stocking spare tires and energy foods for cyclists. We’re also looking at offering cycle rides for local people starting from the cafe.”

Providing people with access to nature while enhancing the site for wildlife



New scrapes created for use by wading birds

As an adviser on the project, Natural England was keen to ensure that the improved cycling and walking routes were delivered with a high level of naturalness and that, where the route was being implemented in a sensitive area, measures were taken to enhance and protect the site. Part of the NCN1 Coast and Castles route runs close to the main Blyth Estuary and the small tidal inlet. It passes close to Northumberland Shore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), as well as adjacent mudflats to the north and east of the route that are used by a wide range of wading birds and waterfowl, including some of those important to the SSSI designation.



Map showing location of new scrapes and scrub planting

A proposal funded by Natural England was put forward to create a small number of shallow scrapes on either side of the mouth of the watercourse as it enters the River Blyth on the south side of the estuary and to the north of the Kitty Brewster Industrial Estate. Approximately 0.25 ha of scrapes were created for use by wading birds at high tide, as well as 400m of native hedge and screen scrub planting (including hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose and bramble), without which the increased use of the cycle route and path risked disturbing the birds that rely on the estuary.

Completed in just over a month between February and March 2011, this small intervention at a cost of £5,000 has created a very useful habitat and high-tide roosting and feeding site for waders and waterfowl. It demonstrates how green infrastructure can help deliver sustainable transport projects sensitively. Giving people access to nature and the conservation of sensitive sites does not have to be in conflict if appropriate screening and mitigation measures are designed into projects.

Blyth Active Travel Town was the first of its kind in the UK. This success can be accredited to the coordination of the delivery and promotion of new walking and cycling infrastructure, together with a three-year programme aimed at changing people's attitudes to travel. The integrated delivery of all of these elements has empowered people in Blyth when making short journeys to choose walking or cycling as opposed to travelling by car.

For further information

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