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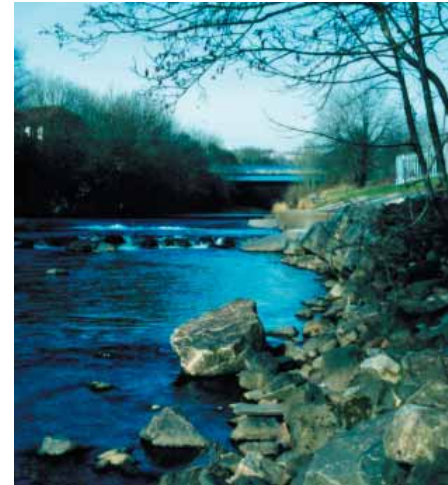
Better Places
What our work means
to communities

A close-up photograph of a young man with dark hair, wearing a green cable-knit beanie and a green jacket with a grey collar. He is smiling and looking slightly to the right. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a construction site with scaffolding.

Places matter to people

Better places tells the story of how we work with others to improve deprived communities and what this work means for local people.

Places matter to people. Open an area up, make it safer and more pleasant to visit, encourage wildlife to thrive in it, and you'll find people's whole outlook on their local environment can be transformed.



In parts of the country over-burdened with social and economic problems, such transformations can mean even more to local communities. Create sports facilities where none previously existed and children are more likely to get out and exercise. Connect parks up and improve them for everyone's benefit and crime levels go down. Make wildlife fun and interesting for the whole family and people will form bonds with the natural environment.

We know all this thanks to the findings of our new study *Delivering regeneration through environmental improvement*. This looked at what our work does for the local economy, for people's health, for crime reduction and for education. Indeed what it does for the very quality of people's lives. Here we present an overview of the project and summarise the findings.

What did we do?

We chose five projects where we'd worked alongside like-minded organisations to make a real difference to people's lives and the places they live. We carried out research at all five sites, interviewing visitors, local residents and businesses about a range of issues.

The five projects represent a good cross-section of our work. They cover improvements to rivers and water quality, the benefits of fishing and learning about the natural environment, different approaches to managing flood risk, and what restoring rivers can do for urban parks.

“There are definitely more people in the park on a weekend. You see children and families coming in more. Since it's been opened up. Since more care has been taken...”

Rita Barnes

Friends of Chinbrook Meadows



“When you catch a fish you feel really good. Happy with yourself.”

Anya Earp
Member of the Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association



“It used to be very industrialised at one time. There was about thirty miles of railway sidings that linked the Dearne Valley. To get this out of it is unbelievable”

Mr Dearing
Rotherham

Where did we go?

1. Clwyd Valley, Denbigshire, North Wales

Fishing in Wales is big business. The Welsh Tourist Board estimates there were almost 60,000 fishing trips to Wales in 2004/05, worth £69 million to the economy.

We decided to take a closer look at what this means for communities around the Clwyd Valley in North Wales—particularly whether tourism really is increasing, and what the benefits are to the economy. We carried out interviews with 31 local businesses, including 12 hotels and eight fisheries.

2. River Taff, Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales

Here we looked at whether getting children involved in fishing and learning about the life cycle of the salmon could improve their educational skills.

We researched two initiatives—the Salmon Homecoming Project and the Angling Participation Project. We interviewed teachers, angling club members and school Heads to identify the benefits of these projects.

3. Freiston Shore, Lincolnshire

This 733-hectare reserve is part of a massive flood defence scheme where sea banks have been moved or strengthened along 8km of the Lincolnshire coast. New saltmarsh provides a mixed habitat for breeding, roosting and wintering waterbirds.

Numbers of visitors to the site have more than quadrupled in just a few years. We looked into why people visit, what the health benefits are and what they learn there.

4. Old Moor, Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire

The Dearne Valley lies between Barnsley and Doncaster and is a former coal mining area. The valley contains a number of wetland sites that also store flood water, helping to protect communities further downstream.

At the 250-acre Old Moor site, a new visitor centre and improved facilities for birdwatchers have seen visitor numbers soar in recent years. Carrying out surveys and interviews, we wanted to find out why they came, what it meant to them and what it did for the local community.

5. Chinbrook Meadows, Lewisham, South London

The river in this urban park ran in a straight concrete channel until a locally-backed initiative saw it restored to a natural, meandering form. Where the park was split in two by the channel, a fence and hedge, it's been opened up and is now connected by a bridge and boardwalk. New sports facilities, pavilion and an outdoor learning area complete the improvements.

We assessed whether this ‘joining up’ of the park made it feel safer and what the project had done for community spirit.



“London is a concrete jungle and places like this are like your lungs of London... it’s your own little countryside.”

Roy Palmer
local resident



What did we find out?

Health and wellbeing Ninety per cent of visitors to Old Moor and Freiston Shore felt an increased sense of wellbeing after visiting. A third to a half of visitors use the sites more often—for example at old moor this meant a 400% increase in visits—leading to increased levels of physical activity.

Education Teachers reported clear benefits from the Salmon Homecoming project, including improved core skills in literacy and numeracy, and knowledge relevant to the science curriculum. We also found evidence that children’s confidence to learn had increased.

At Old Moor and Freiston Shore, we found that two thirds of the people we talked to felt they had learnt about wildlife and natural habitats. Around half of these said this learning had changed their attitudes towards the environment.

Economy At Old Moor and Freiston, huge increases in visitor numbers have created new jobs and brought significant benefits to local businesses. In North Wales 35 per cent of tourist businesses reported increases in turnover since Fishing Wales began in 2003.

Social Forty four per cent of visitors to Freiston and Old Moor said it gave them an increased sense of attachment to their local community and 100 per cent felt able to trust others in these places. In Chinbrook 20 per cent of visitors felt safer and over half mentioned a reduction in littering and graffiti.

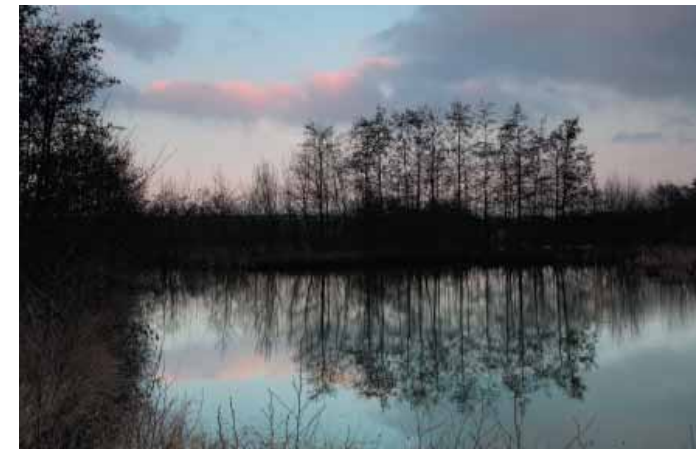
“We used to have a problem with glue sniffers. Then we got people coming along and burning cars out. Now you just don’t see them. It’s a lot, lot better.”

Tim Noble
local resident

For more information

you can order copies of the full report through our online publications catalogue at www.environment-agency.gov.uk or call Claire Johnstone on 01454 205580.

Detailed, full-colour case study summaries are also available for Chinbrook Meadows, Merthyr Tydfil and Old Moor.



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