



Somerset Wildlife Trust

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Routes to the River Tone Evaluation Report

July 2017



Routes to the River Tone

Routes to the River Tone, led by Somerset Wildlife Trust and funded by The Heritage Lottery Fund, Viridor and Tesco Bags of Help, was a three year project running between March 2014 and March 2017. The project aimed to connect local people to the amazing wildlife of

Taunton's waterways and green spaces, inspiring them to appreciate, value and champion the urban nature on their doorstep. Here are some of our highlights.



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Background to the project

The majority of the UK's population now lives in an urban setting with the perception being that wildlife is only found on nature reserves and that towns are barren places, where little wildlife can be found. In Taunton nothing could be further from the truth. The town is blessed with a rich tapestry of interwoven green spaces and waterways, teeming with an amazing variety of wildlife. Iconic species, including otters, water voles and several types of bat, are known to live within the town thanks to the river, its tributaries and bordering green spaces, along with a whole host of other popular species such as kingfisher, barn owl, dragonflies, bees and butterflies.

Research has shown that access to rich and vibrant open spaces improves our health and well-being, making people happier and healthier. It gives people space to commute, to play and socialise, to exercise, to learn or simply to sit and be. Access to nature is important for all of us and what is good for wildlife is also good for us.

There was a passionate core of local wildlife enthusiasts in the town, many of whom already volunteered their time to 'Friends of' groups, looking after the town's locally designated wildlife sites. However, these sites were under-appreciated, had low visitor numbers and were fragmented. The wildlife that lived in these green and blue spaces was under threat from the town's ambitious plans for growth.

In 2014 Somerset Wildlife Trust and partners were successful in their application to The Heritage Lottery Fund to deliver a three year innovative urban community engagement project; Routes to the River Tone.

What we hoped to achieve

Routes to the River Tone aimed to realise our vision for Taunton:

A vibrant network of wild spaces across the town, rich in wildlife and valued and supported by local people.

We hoped to connect local people to the amazing wildlife of Taunton's waterways and green spaces, igniting a spark amongst them and inspiring them to begin a journey of exploration, experiencing nature on their doorstep first hand. For many this would be a new and exciting adventure, one which will continue well beyond the lifetime of the project. In doing so, it was hoped local communities would value these areas and develop a sense of stewardship towards them, helping to secure their future as a vital and integral aspect of the county town.

Building in support from communities, partners and the local business community would be key to the project's success and the long-term sustainable management of Taunton's natural heritage, and would ensure that wildlife, and the places it lives, are important, relevant and cared for, making Taunton a richer place for wildlife and people.

How we hoped to achieve it

To achieve our ambitions the project was split into four main areas:

1. **Discovery** – encouraging learning and active participation amongst local communities through involvement in citizen science programmes, mapping out the important wildlife corridors that link Taunton into the wider countryside and helping to ensure these corridors are safeguarded into the future.
2. **Connections** – Working with schools to inspire a love of nature and sense of place amongst children, encouraging the use of green space and realising the physical, personal and social benefits it can bring.
3. **Nature** – Making spaces better for people and wildlife through practical greenspace restoration and management and encouraging local communities and 'Friends of' groups to take ownership
4. **Journeys** – Making nature accessible through trails, interpretation and public events to introduce the public to their local sites and wildlife and learn about it.



Discovery

Project Activity: Citizen Science

Aims

To create a community survey programmes for key national BAP-listed species – soprano pipistrelle, noctule, brown long eared and lesser horseshoe bats and water voles.

Activities

- A series of survey training session in both survey technique and sound analysis were held over the project by project staff and the Somerset Bat group to train members of the public in survey techniques for bats, water voles and otters. 132 volunteers were trained in total (57 bats + 75 water vole/ otter).
- Nine survey transects were mapped across Taunton by project staff to be surveyed by volunteers. Transect locations were chosen to give a good indication of species abundance and most important sites for the species.
- Our targets was to conduct 36 surveys over two years, the success of the programme and the commitment of our volunteers meant we delivered 64 surveys over three years. Surveys were carried out across the area to get a better picture of species abundance.
- The bat survey work was so successful it has been decided to maintain it as an ongoing programme. Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) and Somerset Bat Group will carry on training volunteers, as well as working with the existing volunteers to deliver survey across Taunton.
- In addition to the BAP species, volunteers are now being trained to survey other species such as dragonflies and butterflies.

Outcomes

- The nationally rare Nathusius' pipistrelle was recorded for the first time in Taunton during surveying as well as the confirmation of a hibernation site for Daubenton's and lesser horseshoe bats within the town.
- The original budget for volunteer input into the overall project was exceeded by around 30% - the bulk of this was down to the additional work undertaken by the volunteers for this activity.
- A comprehensive report has been produced, and set out potential surveys that will build on that work, generating some interesting data with regards bats in Taunton and set the ground work for survey work to come.
- The data on bats has already been used by Somersset Wildlife Trust to inform development proposals and work to ensure the bat populations are taken into consideration.
- SERC will continue to encourage volunteers to get involved with Taunton activities and report back sightings via the on-line recording database. Volunteers can develop their skills with the help of SERC and the county specialist groups (such as the Somerset branch of Butterfly Conservation). Resources such as books, ID guides and personal help with ID will be provided. Training in sound analysis has been offered to a team of four volunteers who will complete this work under the guidance of the Somerset Bat Group members.

Project Activity: Interactive website

Aims

To develop a website for users to upload their wildlife sightings and find out more about the wildlife of Taunton.

Activities

- A page with information about the project as well as ways to get involved was created on the Somerset Wildlife Trust website. An interactive page linked to this was also created for people to record their wildlife sightings. This recording page was based on a system already used by Somerset Environmental Records Centre.
- New Facebook and Twitter pages were created for the project to inform people of the work being done and help promote events.
- Four mapped interactive trails were added to the 'Exploring Taunton' pages of the website including our very popular River Tone Story Trail, to encourage and guide people to explore the towns rivers and green spaces.

Outcomes

- With 322 Facebook and 813 Twitter followers social media has been instrumental in encouraging people to get involved with the project, with some events being filled almost exclusively through that means. 26,000 people were reached through social media by the launch of the North Taunton Art Trail.
- The Facebook and Twitter pages will remain active to promote ongoing work in Taunton and to continue the community by enabling people to share experiences.
- The webpages will remain hosted by SWT and will be maintained as an integral aspect to our Taunton work programmes.
- We had a target to gain 100% growth in website visits each year, we far exceeded this with visits going from Yr1 163 (149 unique), Yr2 1410 (1149), Yr3 6186 (4977 unique).



Connections

Project Activity: Schools engagement and WildPlay

Aims

To work with six selected schools to deliver a range of activities.

Activities

- This aspect of the project was delivered through a series of school assembly talks, themed education sessions, working with school environment clubs, wildflower planting, wildlife discovery days and WildPlay sessions. The sessions were delivered by project staff, paid sessional staff and volunteers.
- Forest school sites were also created for schools to deliver their own sessions and advice was provided to schools on how to improve their schools grounds to benefit wildlife and tier pupils.
- The project enabled 8 Taunton based teachers to be trained with Otterhead Forest School for their level 3 qualification. The teachers were also provided with equipment for their schools to allow them to deliver Forest School and WildPlay led activities beyond the lifetime of the project.

Outcomes

- Over the course of the project 3016 children engaged in wildlife education and wild play sessions.
- Children from 19 schools, colleges and youth groups took part in project activities over the three years significantly surpassing the target of 6 schools originally planned.
- Nine whole school assemblies were delivered on the wildlife of the River Tone engaging 2110 children and 13 'Wildlife of the River Tone' sessions were delivered in school grounds.
- Children from 9 schools took part in River Tone wildlife sessions and willow workshops as part of Somerfest and River of Light procession events.
- 900 bulbs and plugs were planted at Netherclay Community Woodland by children from Bishop's Hull Primary School and 85 River Tone shoe boxes created by children as part of their whole school art competition.
- 240 year 8 pupils from Castle School learned how to map flood risk using iPad based ARC GIS systems at Longrun Meadow over two fieldwork days.
- The teachers trained up to deliver Forest School and WildPlay activities will ensure a project legacy which is embedded in the local Forest School and Taunton Learning Partnership, a key requirement for it to be successful.



Case study 1

Blackbrook Primary School

A whole school assembly plus 8 half day 'Wildlife of the River Tone' sessions were delivered in the school grounds, one to each class over the summer term in 2015. Activities included bug home building, clay creature making, River Tone food webs, camera trapping and minibeast hunting. Following the success of the sessions the school were very keen to get more involved and went on to participate in two willow lantern processions delivered by the project. They also redeveloped their pond area which had become neglected as well as creating a new forest school area. One of the teachers has now been trained as a forest school leader and a member of the project team was invited to become a school governor.

"Hopefully we will continue to further the links that have been established, we commit to exploring the tributary more. The forest school is an exciting legacy for us that we hope to use for years and years." - Barney Rycroft, Blackbrook Head Teacher

Case study 2

Halcon WildPlay

There were three elements of the WildPlay delivery at Halcon, the term based work, a summer school programme, and a YMCA based pre-school activity programme. The outcome of these activities has been a huge success. Although hard to quantify, our own observations, coupled with a limited number of Boxall profiles show marked improvements in children's social skills. The work carried out with the YMCA preschool, in one of the most deprived areas of Taunton, resulted in the children having a very different relationship with the outdoors to when they first ventured out. They went from being very nervous of the outdoors, often clinging to their helpers, to becoming more confident and interested in what was there. The staff have seen the benefits for themselves and have now created their own mud kitchen area for the children within the preschool grounds. A further positive outcome of the work involved an individual who had volunteered with the sessions to gain experience of working with children with behavioural and developmental issues. Subsequently he, along with his wife, were successfully selected to adopt two children with the WildPlay volunteering being a contributory factor.

"It had the impact of highlighting that a lot of the children don't do this sort of thing anymore, it is missing from their childhood." - Judy Cannings, YMCA Preschool Manager

"Kids with even the most challenging situations can surprise you. I learnt to be more confident around children, which is the main thing, I learnt a lot just through watching children play." - WildPlay volunteer

Project Activity: Historical Project 'Peeling back the layers'

Aims

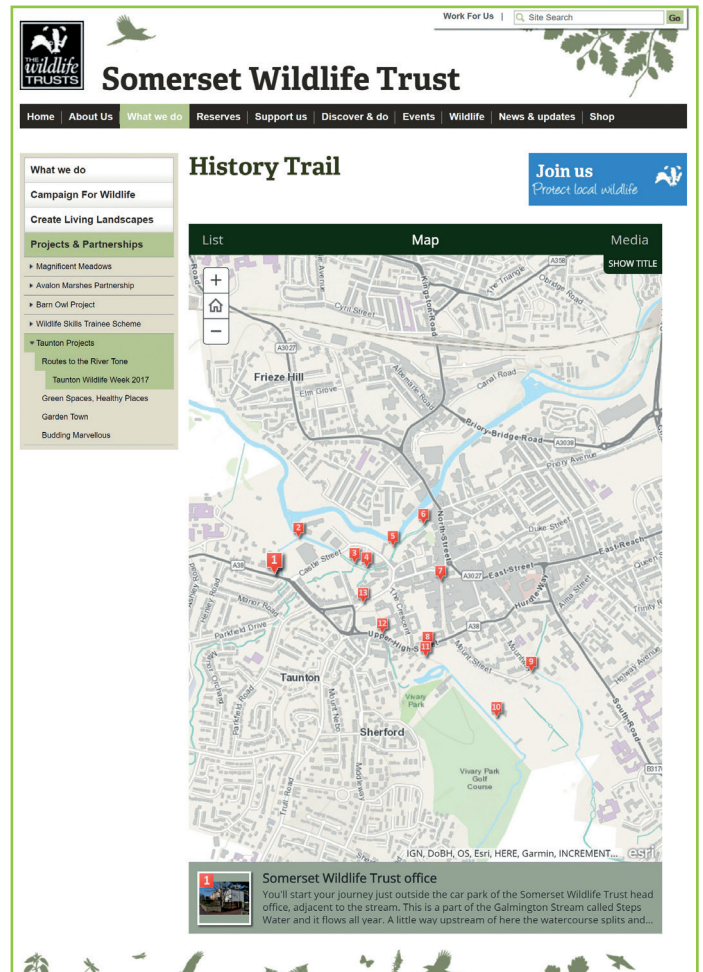
To highlight the importance of the history of the River Tone.

Activities

- Volunteer and former steering group member Francis Farr-Cox led a walk on the history of the River Tone and its tributaries during Taunton Wildlife Week 2016.
- The walk received hugely positive feedback and as such it was decided to create a new interactive trail which can be accessed via the website. The trail leads people on a journey around Taunton telling the story of key watercourses across the town.
- An hour long audio documentary was produced by Tone FM following the stories of Taunton residents and their memories of the River Tone and its tributaries. In the lead up to its production Tone FM spoke regularly about the RTRT project on air encouraging viewers to contribute their memories to the documentary.
- Tone FM also produced a beautiful and highly emotive video of the River Tone using drone footage giving people a totally different perspective of the River and its wildlife. This video is posted on the Somerset Wildlife Trust website and YouTube channel.

Outcomes

- The video created by Tone FM was shared widely on social media and was played during the projects final celebration event to much acclaim.
- The trail and video as well as the oral histories piece will remain on the Somerset Wildlife Trust website as part of the project legacy.

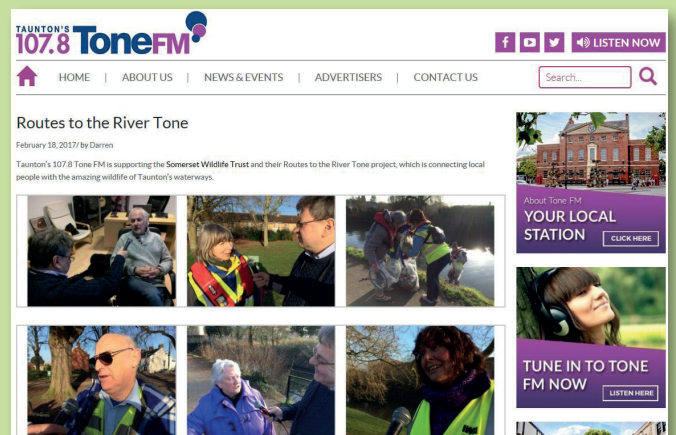


Some memories recorded by Tone FM for the audio documentary:

"Seeing a heron and kingfisher sitting next to each other on the old lock bridge over the Tone. They stayed there for ages having a 'chat' before both diving in to the water. The heron caught a huge fish whilst the kingfisher flew off empty beaked! Amazing!"
- K Kavanagh

"Looking at the ducks with our first born 26 years ago. A beautiful sunny day and she was in a pushchair. One friendly duck came up and tried to nibble her toes. Didn't hurt. Just remember lots of giggles." - S Jones

"A couple of weeks ago a friend and I had an amazing experience, seeing an Egret and a Kingfisher so close to each other next to the Third Way road bridge. So close to town, and they were there again on our return from town. It was both of ours best sighting ever of a kingfisher!" - T Hicks



Nature

Aim

To create bigger, better, more joined up places for nature across Taunton.

This aspect of the project was carried out through a mixture of working with Taunton Dean Borough Council, local volunteer groups, school groups and local businesses. Contractors were also brought in to complete some aspects of greenspace development. The main sites where improvements were made are covered below.

Netherclay Community Woodland

A large amount of work was carried out at Netherclay Community Woodland with a local community group during the project. This group contributed a huge amount of volunteer time, working each week during the winter of 15/16 and every other week over the winter of 16/17. This work included hedge laying, hazel coppicing, tree thinning, habitat creation and scrub clearance. A new Forest School/ WildPlay area was created for use in the delivery of the project's activities with Bishop's Hull School and for families to make use of. Forty bird boxes were also put up at the site.

Outcomes

During the time the project worked on the site six new volunteers became involved to help with the delivery of the work programme. This formed the nucleus of a new 'Friends of' group which has continued beyond the lifetime of the project. Tools were purchased for this volunteer group to enable them to carry on looking after the site.



Children's Wood

Work began with Viridor, a large national business that is based in Taunton, in 2015, under their Corporate Social Responsibility Programme, whereby the company would give all members of staff half a day a year to volunteer in the community. The volunteers carried out willow pollarding and scrub management, as well as re-planting the orchard that had declined in previous years. Bird and bat boxes were also put up at the site. The Viridor volunteers contributed over 300 volunteer hours and attracted many complimentary remarks about how nice it was to see the site being looked after.

Outcomes

The Viridor work at Children's Wood, and the impact the volunteers have had, was part of the inspiration for the creation of a new 'Friends of' group that wishes to create trails and activities around Children's Wood and which the project supported in planting 1,000 bluebell bulbs (the ground for which planting was prepared by the Viridor teams).

Following on from the success of the relationship with Viridor they agreed to provide match funding for Routes to the River Tone and contribute to the costs of the interpretation boards that we have installed across the green spaces of Taunton. They have also helped to fund a new Taunton Community Engagement Officer at the Trust for a year. The post holder will continue to deliver volunteering opportunities and focus on the health and wellbeing benefits that green spaces afford.



Taunton Academy

One particular teacher at the school was very interested in developing the school grounds with her students for the benefit of wildlife. The project supplied seeds and advice to create a wildflower meadow, covering around an acre of land. An orchard was planted in December 2016 with the help of the students with a total of 12 traditional varieties of British apple trees being planted.

Wedlands Green Space

In December 2016 residents near Wedlands Green Space were surveyed regarding the planting of an orchard in the space. All those surveyed responded positively, believing it would enhance the area. In March 2017 an orchard of 15 trees was planted with a group of 30 children from Priorswood School.

Blenheim Park

An orchard was planted at Blenheim Park in Halcon in November 2016. A total of 22 trees were planted with the help of the local community. A total of 13 volunteers were involved in the planting with an average of two hours spent by each volunteer.

Outcomes

- Between 3% & 4% of the total land area in the project area underwent habitat restoration works.
- New Management Plans were drawn up for Netherclay Community Woodland, Silk Mills, Blackbrook Open Space, Weirfield Riverside, Children's Wood, Glasses Mead and Killams Open Space.
- Frieze Hill Community Orchard was outside the original activity plan, as were Victoria Park and Comeytrove, but advice and support were given to the friends of groups at these sites so they could prepare their own plans.
- Three training courses in hedge laying were delivered over the winter of 15/16, involving volunteers from Netherclay Woodland and several other sites across Taunton.
- An orchard restoration course was held in March 2016 for people interested in the upkeep and planting of traditional orchards in the area.

Case study

An access path that used to exist through the woodland at Weirfields Riverside was restored and a number of areas of bramble were removed to allow the vegetation underneath to re-generate. As a result of this work a community group that used to exist at the site was inspired to reform and take an interest in looking after it. The project bought them hand tools to enable them to undertake practical works on the site.



Journeys

Project Activity: Improving access to nature across town - trails

Aims

To improve access to nature across the town by creating a number of trails.

Activities

- Working with Somerset Art Works an art trail was created in North Taunton by street artist Louis Masai. The 4 pieces feature key species from the project and are spray painted on buildings across the area. In addition to the main art pieces, children of Priorswood Primary School created a series of artworks, again based on the wildlife of Taunton, and these were used as templates to produce 70 moveable tin sculptures which were placed at suitable locations along the length of the art trail. A geocache trail was also set up linked to the art trail where people had to visit each art work and then solve a puzzle.
- Funded through the Tesco Bags of Help Scheme, and working with local artist Louise Farwell a river Story Trail was created that follows the exploits of Ollie the Otter as he moves along the river to find a new home. At the start of the trail there is an interpretation board introducing the trail and telling you how to download a copy of the map and story from the Wildlife Trust website. There are markers and wooden otters along the route as well as art pieces to illustrate the story.
- A 'misguided walk' was held on the Blackbrook, which attracted 30 attendees. These are guided walks with a difference, a kind or semi-irreverent look at the natural world, through a mixture of performance, art and the more traditional walk.
- A series of short WildWalks were developed and launched with Viridor. The aim being to give people a quick walk around local green spaces that they can do in their lunch hour, encouraging them to take time away from their desks, be active and develop an interest in their local environment. Cards were printed for each walk, highlighting the key things to look out for along the way. Downloadable versions of the walks were also added to the website.
- Fifteen interpretation panels have been designed and installed on the green spaces of Taunton. Each board has a map and information about the site as well as the wildlife people may see there. On the back of the boards is a map of the town and the main green spaces they can visit, with footpaths they can use to navigate around.



- The geocache trail set up has had around 1,300 visits so far.
- The story trail is available to download from the Wildlife Trust website as well as several other Taunton based sites. Copies of the trail have also been delivered to local schools. Minerva school (previously known as Halcon, a target school of the project) requested additional copies for the whole of Key Stage 1. The leaflets have proved so popular that the original 2,000 printed were used up within three weeks of production and a reprint was needed.
- The launch of the WildWalks was very successful, with over 60 people turning up from a number of different local businesses. A follow up survey revealed over 90% of participants planned to do the walk more regularly in their lunchtimes.
- Each of the trails is accessible through the SWT website, to explore virtually or to print out and explore on foot. All have been very well received and will leave a legacy that will enable people to better explore and enjoy Taunton.
- The interpretation boards are being well received, anecdotal evidence suggests lots of people are stopping to view them and feedback through social media suggests they are a welcome addition to the sites. Very little vandalism has taken place on them.

"We worked with a nature graffiti artist who created large scale street art; it brought awareness to wildlife in the local area. None of those pieces have been vandalised even now after two years." - Beccy Swaine, Learning and Engagement manager at Somerset Art Works on the North Taunton Art Trail.

"A thoroughly enjoyable stroll, in which I learned more about the local geography and ecology, from the knowledgeable guide. It was nice to meet new people and I certainly felt less stressed on return to the office."

"It's a really innovative idea that gets you away from your desk and at the same time helps your health and wellbeing." - Comments from the Blackbrook WildWalk launch.

Case study

Whilst working at Halcon Primary School and for Taunton YMCA we identified a high level of children with delayed speech. To help to address this, as well as leaving a legacy for the children of Taunton from the project, it was decided to develop a big picture book depicting the story of a day and night by the river. The book introduces the wildlife along the river and the adventures of two young children as they explore for themselves. There are no words, the aim being to promote literacy and imagination, develop a child's understanding and allow the reader to explore things at a pace and in a way they choose. It can be used to tell a simple story of how day follows night, but can be used in increasing depth to follow life cycles, pose questions, challenge ideas and propose projects and activities the reader can follow up. This book, with match funding through the Tesco Bags of Help fund, has been well received by all the Primary and Preschools in Taunton and has also gone to the local library and children's centres.

"The project has produced a book about rivers and the wildlife there, it is wonderful, it's a very visual book so it's perfect for the children. It helps us discuss it again and again." - Judy Cannings, YMCA Preschool Manager

Outcomes

- The creation of the art work for the North Taunton Art Trail was extensively covered on social media and it is estimated that over 26,000 people were reached over the 12 hours the hedgehog took to paint. The trail is available on the Trust's website, as is a video of the creation of the hedgehog and pictures of the artwork.

Project Activity: Run a series of outdoor events

Aims

To run a series of outdoor events to encourage people to explore the green spaces of Taunton and develop their interest in wildlife and utilisation of the areas.

Activities

- A series of events were held linking in with established groups such as Inland Waterways, the Ramblers, local angling clubs and artistic organisations such as Somerset Art Works, FUSE Performance and the Brewhouse Theatre.
- Taunton Wildlife Week was held each year during the three year life of the project. The week, which is held in June, consisted of wildlife themed activities and events on green spaces in Taunton. Events included, river safaris, photography workshops, WildPlay sessions and wildflower walks.
- A final celebration week was held at the end of the project culminating in a River of Light procession along the river.

Outcomes

- Approximately 4,250 people attended project events and the target of 45 events was exceeded, with 70 finally delivered.
- Taunton Wildlife Week grew from around 100 to around 1,000 attendees over the three years. A large part of this success was down to partnership working with other local organisations and groups.
- Aligning our events with other, larger events such as Somerfest allowed us to reach a much bigger audience than would otherwise have been possible.
- Working with others, such as the anglers, also allows us to get our message to audiences who might be harder to reach through stand-alone events.
- Over 500 people attended the River of Light procession along the river showing the clear support the town has for the project. Over 100 of these were children who had been involved in workshops creating large fish lanterns that were used.
- 124 surveys were taken from people attending the projects events, of these 100% of people said they enjoyed the event and 93% said they had learned something new from the event.



Project Activity: Enabling wildlife action

Aims

To involve local people in the care and management of the greenspaces by providing support, encouragement, training and tools.

Activities

- A series of public talks with various audiences were held over the course of the project to encourage people to take ownership of their green spaces and become more involved in protecting their wildlife. Over 1000 people were engaged with.
- Several training courses were provided for volunteers, including first aid, water safety, use of social media, hedge laying, willow laying, tree planting, apple tree care and maintenance and creation of wildflower meadows
- A total of around £3,000 has been spent on tools for five local groups working to protect and enhance the green spaces of Taunton. Groups outside of the project were also supported through the purchase of equipment or the provision of training, to do more on their local sites.
- The project contributed time and resources to Budding Marvellous, a Taunton Association for the Homeless initiative that, with the help of local volunteers, is building a community garden in Taunton for all to enjoy.
- The project funded the construction of a fence for Taunton YMCA to allow them to continue to deliver wild play sessions securely on their site.
- A wider stakeholder group, the Green Forum, was created through the project. The forum is a discussion group for individuals interested in making positive change to the greenspaces of Taunton and allows common goals and issues to be shared and acted upon.

Outcomes

- Our work on local green spaces with volunteers has helped to inspire two new fledgling "Friends of" groups who aim to have an active role in managing their local sites.
- Taunton Watch Group was given a boost by recruiting new leaders and helping with advertising events. Interest has grown with over 20 attendees now regularly coming along to explore their local green spaces and learn more about the wildlife it supports.
- Our work on the Weirfields site has encouraged the community group that exists in the neighbouring estate to re-start their involvement with the site with a view to becoming involved with its management.
- Our support for the Budding Marvellous project enabled it to continue when financial resources threatened its closure, it is now stable with an active volunteer base that will ensure the community garden comes to fruition and will be a beautiful and valued space for the local community.
- The Green Forum has become self-governing and now meets regularly, taking positive steps such as developing a common dog owners code of conduct and feeding in to local consultation processes as a united voice.
- A large range of equipment to support bat and water vole surveys that remains as a resource available for volunteers to utilise in undertaking surveys in the future.

Case study 1

Budding Marvellous – Tony Francis, Taunton Association for the Homeless

In early 2016 Taunton Association for the Homeless (TAH) was given the opportunity to make use of a neglected piece of land behind the Lisieux Way Methodist Church. The project is to involve service users of TAH and local residents to build a community garden for use by all.

After securing some funding from the Tesco 'Bags of Help' scheme, we also had a number of key volunteers helping to coordinate the project. However, due to cuts to TAH's funding and staff shortages, we realised the need to offer a paid position for a Project Coordinator. This brought the project into jeopardy as insufficient funds were available.

As we were already in contact with Somerset Wildlife Trust, we asked them for help. They, very kindly, came up with a solution. With the support of The Heritage Lottery Fund they were able to bring Budding Marvellous in to The Routes to the River Tone project and grant us finances to pay for a coordinator to ensure the long term sustainability of the project.

Budding Marvellous is now gathering pace and fulfilling its potential. We have achieved a huge amount of work over the past year, clearing the space, designing the new layout, installing a compost loo and rainwater harvesting system, just to name a couple of jobs, whilst involving a large number of volunteers.

A regular number of our residents at TAH attend the project weekly, with a group of volunteers living locally, of which some suffer social isolation. They have been working fantastically as a team. The regular interaction between the groups is having an extremely positive effect on them both.

"Busying my time and using it constructively is really good for my mental health"

"I really love the outdoors and chance to get out of the hostel"

"I am learning something new and developing my existing skills"

Budding Marvellous has also succeeded in facilitating training to our clients and the wider public in areas such as wildlife gardening and the therapeutic benefits of horticulture. These lessons were delivered on site to our residents, staff, volunteers and the public.

We are on target to finish the garden by the end of November and expect to have achieved much more by then. Once the space is finished, it will continue to be used for learning opportunities, including workshops and more learning for children as well as adults. We expect the legacy of Budding Marvellous to continue and thrive as a beautiful space accessible to all.

Review of activities

Overall the project was a great success meeting and often exceeding the targets originally set. There are, as always, areas that did not work and from a project and organisational perspective it is important to look at all aspects to learn from and improve on experience.

Citizen science

The bat surveying aspect of the project was hugely successful and something that has now turned in to a long term volunteer based monitoring programme in association with Somerset Bat Group and Somerset Environmental Records Centre. The otter and water vole surveying however was not as successful. Despite a total of 75 volunteers being trained in water vole and otter survey techniques very little data was subsequently recorded. In the first year 15 surveys were carried out however the vegetation was so high that no real signs were visible. In the second year an interactive portal was launched for recordings however uptake was poor. A more reactive approach might have resulted in more sightings being recorded.

Interactive Website

The project page on the Wildlife Trust website is a great legacy of the work done in Taunton and will remain active. The take up of the sightings page however was quite poor, despite being promoted at a range of events and activities and through social media. Investigation into how other organisations make this work would be useful.

Schools Engagement Programme and WildPlay

The school engagement programme and WildPlay sessions have been an incredibly successful aspect of the project with uptake high and real benefits felt by the children involved. However there have been challenges, changes in staff at schools made things difficult to progress at times as relationships were lost, although there is little that can be done about this. Training up teachers in the schools to deliver forest school activities to their students was a massive success and creates a legacy of the project. These teachers will hopefully be in post for many years to come and will carry on engaging young people in nature, the concept of training trainers is certainly one that should be encouraged to ensure long term benefits result from short term projects.

Historical Project `Peeling Back the Layers`

At the start of the project much time was spent trying to engage the key people and organisations named in the activity plan. The large time period between development and delivery of this activity was such that much less support was available than anticipated and plans had to be adapted quite significantly. Despite this some fantastic work was produced engaging a large number of Taunton residents with their local heritage.

Nature

This aspect of the project had some major success such as the writing of the management plans, the formation and bolstering of community groups to look after the greenspaces and the improvement of the green spaces for the enjoyment of the public. There were however aspects that didn't work. It was originally planned to develop a management plan for Hankridge Riverside Park but the complexity of the site management meant the plan stalled and was never completed. Resource limitations within local authority departments meant that, despite support for the project, progress in implementing management change, and even getting planned and agreed work, such as mowing regimes, implemented was difficult. Despite this, the process of writing management plans and getting support for them from the Local Authority has improved our relationship and we believe we will be able to progress things positively.

Improving access to nature: Trails

The development of a series of trails to enhance people enjoyment of Taunton has been a great legacy of the project. The trails created were a slightly scaled back version of the original plan but the diversity of themes mean that more audiences can be reached. Without being able to put pressure pads out it's difficult to quantify this aspect of the project with the number of people utilising the self guided trails but feedback has been very positive and the printed leaflets have been well used and reprints required.

New ways of communicating

The development of the 15 interpretation panels for the greenspaces was a massive undertaking and considerably more time consuming than expected due to the scale of the initiative and the permissions and checks required to site them. However the impact these have on the spaces and the people who see them has been huge.

Series of outdoor events

At the beginning of the project some events were not particularly well attended. It soon became apparent that to reach the target audience number we needed to link in with other pre-existing groups. As the project became more well know stand alone events were possible and very well attended. This demonstrates the need to for community engagement projects to work over a period of time as it is only after a year or two that relationships and trust with the local community can be developed.

Enabling wildlife action: Friends of groups

Overall this aspect has been very successful with several community groups taking an interest in their local greenspace and its management. The provision of tools and training to these volunteers will hopefully provide a lasting legacy in the community. The formation of the green space network group, The Green Forum, is a particularly important as it provides a sustainable, self owned vehicle for community groups to work together after the life of the project.

How others viewed the project

SurveyMonkey

As well as looking at the project successes and challenges from an internal point of view it is extremely important to gain and insight from those external to the project who have interacted with it over the three years. Near the end of the project an online evaluation survey was designed through the website SurveyMonkey. It asked 6 questions about peoples experience with the project. The survey was shared via social media and was emailed out to contacts who had involvement, 97 people responded.

- People were asked had their engagement with the project enhanced their connection and enjoyment of local wildlife, 96% said it had.
- 82% of respondents said they had gained new skills, knowledge or understanding of wildlife or history of the river Tone through the project.
- 99% said they had enjoyed their experience of the project.
- 63% said they would rate their experience of the project as 5 stars.

The full SurveyMonkey data reports are available on request.

Heritage Insider

Heritage Insider Ltd were commissioned to interview people who had participated in the project to ascertain whether they believed that the project aims had been met. Twenty-two telephone interviews were conducted with project stakeholders and delivery partners, volunteers and teachers.

One of the project's major successes highlighted by interviewees was raising awareness of the green spaces amongst the local

communities. Interviewees felt that a diverse range of people from different backgrounds had been involved in the project and people who had never experienced Taunton's green spaces or interacted with its wildlife prior to the project have now done so. They believed many of Taunton's residents were unaware of just how much wildlife surrounded them within the urban setting. Raising awareness amongst children was also considered to be an important success and through programmes such as Forest School and WildPlay the children began to take ownership for the town's wildlife and green spaces. Interviewees did suggest that the awareness raised during the life of project is just the start of a much longer journey for the Somerset Wildlife Trust as the benefits of community engagement are realised over long periods of time.

The use of creative arts to engage people with wildlife was considered another highlight. Large scale murals have been painted around the town on locations such as houses and shops. The murals provide a visual representation of the project's legacy, and whilst some of them have been up for two years, they have not been vandalised, demonstrating the impact they have on passers by.

Interviewees felt that the volunteering opportunities made available by the project were very important, providing a means for people to actively contribute to their town and green space. Volunteers have taken up a variety of different roles, such as WildPlay or practical management. The volunteers have ensured the smooth running of the project, and in turn the project has had a wealth of positive impacts on the volunteers, and has encouraged some to explore wildlife further.

The full Heritage Insider evaluation report can be supplied on request from SWT.



Lessons learnt

- The breadth of activities to be covered by the project was huge and for the original number of staff very challenging. When a further two staff were taken on to deliver particular aspects of the project progress was dramatically increased. Future projects should carefully consider the capacity of staff to deliver project goals and be realistic regarding what can be achieved at the desired quality.
- Partnership working, although not without its challenges, is invaluable. It increases capacity, utilises additional skills and expertise and enables a wider audience to be reached.
- The management plans for the green spaces were not finalised until near the end of the project, meaning implementation was not possible during the grant funded delivery phase. Management plans should really be written at the very start to ensure the maximum amount of resource can be directed towards implementation.
- The project initially relied on the good will of green space managers to make improvements for people and wildlife and ultimately this was unsuccessful. As a result an external contractor was brought in during the final year to carry out improvement works. If this contractor was brought in earlier then more practical improvements may have been made.
- Training teachers to deliver forest school within their own schools ensures a legacy for the future and although the work done by the project in schools is considered to be very beneficial, training up more teachers to deliver themselves would have more lasting impacts, assuming those teachers remain in place.
- Community engagement takes a great deal of time to realise the potential benefits, especially when starting from scratch. Although the first two years of the project achieved significant success, it was not until the third and final year when volunteer groups and public events became really well attended as the project gathered momentum and develop a high quality reputation. Community engagement should be seen as a long term activity and ongoing programmes and funding need to be developed to maintain momentum.



Project legacy and the future for SWT in Taunton

As stated, community engagement programmes can take significant time to realise the full potential and ambitions, as a result, creating an ongoing legacy from relatively short term funding programmes is vital. Some of the key legacy achievements realised by routes to the River Tone, through its HLF grant are detailed below:

- A committed group of very active species recording volunteers who remain engaged in bat surveys across the town and whose data will continue to inform SWT's work around development control and green space management. This group is also branching out to other species such as butterflies and dragonflies.
- A website and social media accounts that remain active and well used that help to ensure a presence and platform for SWT and members of the community to share experience and knowledge.
- Printed materials in the form of interpretation boards and self-guided trail leaflets that continue to encourage exploration of Taunton's green spaces.
- The Budding Marvellous community garden project is on a sustainable footing and making significant progress towards creating, with volunteers, a long lasting beautiful community garden for all.
- An increase in the number of members of the local communities who are actively engaged in managing their local green spaces, developing a sense of ownership and pride, and having the tools and skills to do so.
- Teachers in eight schools have been trained to deliver ongoing Forest School and outdoor education programmes.
- School grounds have been improved as outdoor education areas allowing teachers to make ongoing use of these facilities.
- The Green Forum provides an ongoing platform for volunteer green space managers to discuss and share information and develop joint initiatives.
- Green spaces have received practical management improvements, including meadows, orchards and path maintenance, and are valued and used by the local communities.
- The profile of the importance of green spaces and the need to adjust management regimes to meet the needs and wants of local communities and wildlife has been realised by green space managers
- Somerset Wildlife Trust has developed a reputation for delivering high quality community engagement opportunities and initiatives, which has raised our profile and experience and will allow us to capitalise on this in the future.

- Less tangible and more difficult to quantify but feedback suggests green spaces, and the river and streams, are now better understood and valued by the residents of Taunton and this should help ensure their protection and improvement in the future.
- SWT's relationship with Viridor, built on our Routes to the River Tone community engagement work in Taunton, continues to grow and is in its fourth year, providing additional support for us to continue to deliver.

As one of our Living Landscape priority areas for delivery, SWT remains committed to working in Taunton. We recognise the need to make the natural environment relevant to all and as such working in an urban environment, in our county town, where there is a wealth of green space and wildlife presents a perfect opportunity for us to engage with a large and diverse number of people.

Although not a core aspect of Routes to the River Tone, anecdotal evidence suggested that additional benefits to people's health and wellbeing through access and engagement with green spaces were realised. This is something SWT wish to capitalise upon as we see it as an opportunity to make nature relevant to a broader section of society. We will build upon the Routes to the River Tone legacy and our reputation to develop health and wellbeing focussed engagement opportunities.

In January 2017, Taunton was awarded Garden Town status. This presents an opportunity for SWT to work across a number of themes to embed the importance of access to nature in town planning, development, green space management, education and health and social care. The foundations laid during Routes to the River Tone means we are now important consultees in the process, recognised for being able to provide objective, evidenced based advice on the importance of green spaces for people and wildlife and we will be using this to support the Garden Town process in achieving an ambitious plan for ensuring Taunton is a green and vibrant town with residents who use and value their green spaces.



Acknowledgements

Routes to the River Tone, led by the Somerset Wildlife Trust, was a partnership project and its success is down to all of the organisations and individuals who supported and contributed to it. Somerset Wildlife Trust is extremely grateful too, and would like to thank, Heritage Lottery Fund, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Somerset County Council, The Environment Agency, Natural England, Canal and River Trust, Viridor, Tesco Bags of Help, Friends of Longrun Meadow, Taunton Association for the Homeless, The Green Forum, Taunton Local Area Group, Fuse Performance, The Brewhouse, Somerset Art Works, BBC Radio Somerset, Tone FM, Somerset Bat Group, Somerset Environmental Records Centre, Somerset Museum, GLL, North Taunton Partnership, Priorswood Community Centre, Inland waterways Association, all of the school teachers and pupils we have worked with, our volunteers and the local residents of Taunton who have so positively engaged in the project.

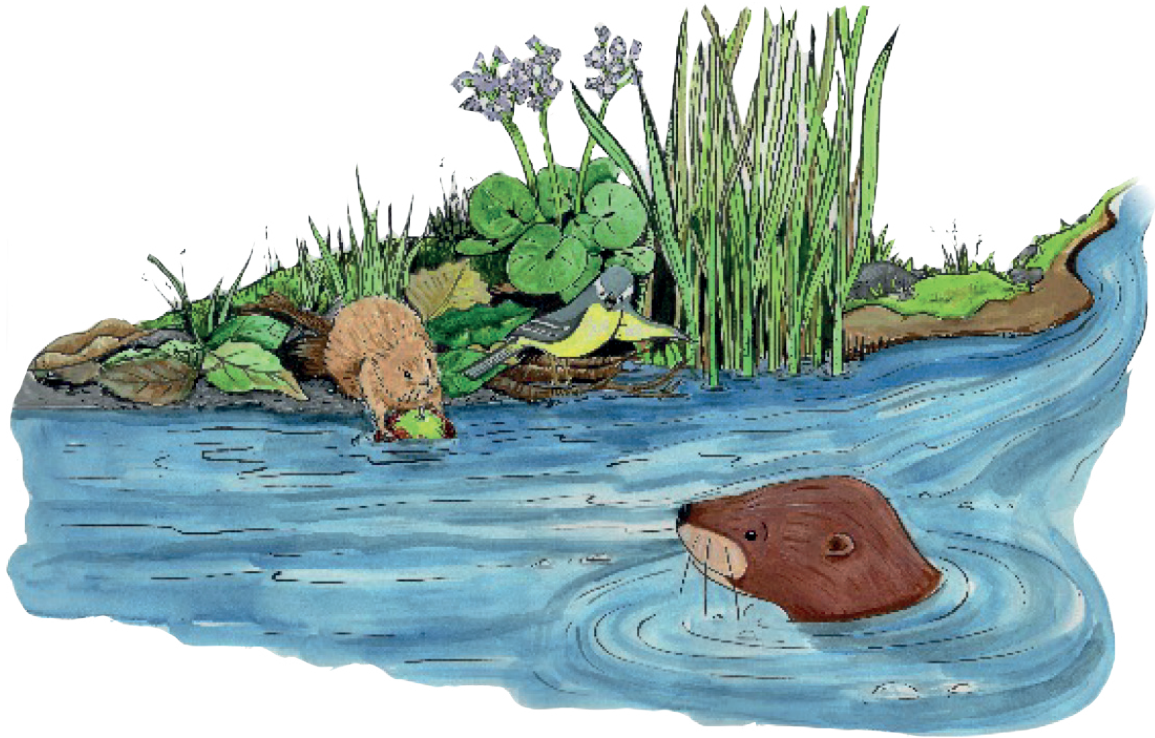


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