



## Sustainable Places Projects: The Canal and River Trust (CRT)

The Canal and River Trust is responsible for 2000 miles of canal and navigable rivers, plus associated wildlife and historic sites. This represents a considerable resource for recreation, transport, physical activity and more. In partnership with the Canal and River Trust the Sustainable Places Research Institute is investigating the public benefits of inland waterways in England and Wales.

Research Associate Dr Hannah Pitt is researching what socio-demographic factors affect engagement with waterways, and seeking to identify how greater involvement can be facilitated. The research is helping understand the social, economic and environmental benefits arising from waterways, and how else they might contribute positively to sustainable places and communities.

Following the signing of a strategic partnership in 2013, the first piece of collaborative work with Canal and River Trust was to design an outcomes framework and supporting suite of indicators which reflected their strategic goals, allowing them to measure delivery of public benefits. The framework is being embedded into the organisation and its work. The institute is working with the Trust to share this as good practice in measuring and reporting an organisation's contribution to national wellbeing and sustainability.

The institute has also undertaken research to help the Trust target activity and gather evidence around its ambitions for broadening the diversity of waterway users, to maximise the number and range of people benefiting from them. This aims to identify opportunities for furthering community use of and engagement with waterways in England and Wales. A two year project has helped the Trust gain fuller understanding of who is not using waterways at present, and why. The purpose of the research is to support the Trust in its strategic objective of ensuring that the people benefiting from waterways reflect the demographic profile of the population living alongside them.

Research began by characterising people currently visiting waterways through a survey of towpath users. This found that young people, females and those of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds are currently under-represented amongst waterway users, given the demographic profile of those living nearby. Four case studies locations were then chosen to explore reasons for this in more detail. The priority was areas where there are concentrations of people who stand to benefit from greater access to waterways, for example places with high levels of economic and health deprivation, and dense urban areas with little open green space. The research also aimed to

engage some of the ethnic communities not currently well represented amongst waterway beneficiaries.

Case study research focused on:

- young people in Blackburn,
- parents of young children in Milton Keynes
- East African communities in Leicester,
- young and older people in Tower Hamlets.

A key finding was that negative perceptions of canal environments as unpleasant and risky are pervasive across multiple communities. Waterways struggle to appeal to young people who feel their time is pressured and prefer other types of leisure spaces. In contrast, older people are very open to recreation available around canals, but are deterred by safety concerns. Most barriers apply across ethnic groups, but more recently established communities are less likely to have developed a habit of visiting waterways, hence low levels of understanding about how they can be enjoyed.

Researchers also examined projects which have sought to introduce people to waterways. Key to their success was sustained engagement over time, and designing activities to appeal to each target group. The research has already helped establish a new project to offer young people from Leicester's Somali community to explore their local waterway environment.

The results of research are being shared with Canal and River Trust staff so it can inform future activity. In collaboration with the Trust, researchers will prepare practical tools to support local teams to understand their communities. A third phase of research is being developed to build on the results and address gaps it identified.



## Research Lead

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