

PLACE-MAKING AND THE RIVERS OF LEWISHAM

SYNERGIES, CONFLICTS AND POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM RIVERSIDE DEVELOPMENT, REGENERATION AND RECREATION ACTIVITIES

KEY INSIGHTS

- Lewisham's rivers have increasingly been featured more prominently in local development policies and play an important part in shaping the borough.
- The local authority should provide clear and specific guidance to private developers on their duties and responsibilities around maintaining river spaces and put in place appropriate accountability mechanisms.
- River spaces should be made accessible to a wide range of publics to ensure that all residents can benefit from their positive impact on wellbeing.
- Riverside infrastructure, such as benches and lighting, should be improved to increase usage in isolated spaces and enhance sense of safety.
- Education around engaging safely with rivers should be available to local residents, and more official recognition given to the importance of rivers in different cultures.
- Local nature conservation groups should continue to be funded to maintain existing synergies between public, private and civic partners.



RECOMMENDATIONS

ENSURE CLARITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY WHEN WORKING WITH DEVELOPERS

Our analysis revealed a shift in recent years in the way Lewisham's rivers have been featured in development policy with increasing emphasis on the rivers as having a social, economic, ecological and infrastructural function. There has also been a shift in the role of the local authority in planning policy away from the Council being chiefly responsible for urban change towards providing guidance for the private entities who will invest in and carry out the development, including around river spaces.

This prompts important questions around how guidance in relation to river restoration or enhancement will be interpreted by developers and how their implementation of the guidance will be monitored by the local authority.

There is a need to delineate what key terms, including 'naturalisation' and 'river restoration', signify and how the practical application of these should be enacted in the different river sites across the borough. This should be done in conversation with local river groups.

To increase accountability, we recommend that a publicly accessible document outlines the work to be undertaken by developers and landowners to maintain river spaces. This should include details on who is responsible for particular stretches of the river bank.

ENSURE WIDE PUBLIC ACCESSIBILITY

Our findings highlight the range of benefits resulting from contact with rivers around wellbeing and creativity. Overall, where accessible, the paths and open green spaces along the rivers are very well-used for play, recreation, sports and dog-walking.

However, barriers to physically accessing the rivers were also identified, including lack of steps, fencing and steep banks. The Lewisham Local Plan already acknowledges there are discrepancies in access, with potential new housing developments likely to increase such pressures.

BACKGROUND

While the riverfront development of large rivers – and the Thames specifically – has been extensively researched, less attention has been paid to smaller bodies of water that nonetheless play an important part in urban development.

This policy brief provides recommendations arising from research that focuses on three rivers located in the London Borough of Lewisham – the Ravensbourne, the Quaggy and the Pool.

As rivers become more prominent in local strategies – including around managing flood risk in a time of climate crisis – this research offers important insights for the work of both the Borough of Lewisham and Greater London Authority (GLA).

In addition, the findings and recommendations outlined below could hold relevance to local authorities across the Greater London region, and UK more broadly, which may face similar challenges.

It is important to recognise that there is a social value for river spaces, and these should be made accessible to a wide range of publics.

● ENHANCE SAFETY BY IMPROVING INFRASTRUCTURE

Safety concerns were also raised regarding riverside paths that are often relatively isolated. Participants in the study – particularly women – described feeling unsafe there at certain times of the day, when fewer people are using them.

Infrastructure – including benches, bins and lighting – can lead to more people using the spaces and increased dwell-time, which would in turn enhance people’s sense of safety.

● EDUCATE LOCAL RESIDENTS ON ENGAGING WITH RIVERS SAFELY

Conceptual barriers to access were also identified, with some residents expressing uncertainty about the safety of rivers and emphasising the need for more information around rivers’ depths, currents and flows, as well as the water’s cleanliness and whether a place is open to the public.

There is a need for specific funding for education to increase knowledge locally about engaging safely with the rivers, to reduce fear of increasing public access to water. This will empower residents in decisions around theirs and their children’s interactions with rivers.

Such an initiative can also increase the confidence of the local authority in navigating questions of risk and accessibility in the future planning of river spaces.

● MAINTAIN FUNDING FOR LOCAL NATURE CONSERVATION GROUPS

There is an extensive network of government, private and volunteer organisations and groups who maintain and care for the rivers and river spaces.

Volunteers, community groups and Friends groups make a significant contribution to the maintenance of the rivers by working closely with paid experts, who identify tasks and provide guidance and equipment. In turn, volunteers describe an overwhelmingly positive impact this has had on their wellbeing.

It is essential that the existing synergies between public, private and civic partners are maintained and that these groups continue to be funded.

● INCREASE CULTURALLY SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT

Rivers can be important places for people to connect through spiritual practices, through offerings and engaging in other forms of ritual. Yet some minoritised groups do not see their cultural practices reflected in the ways that green and blue spaces are promoted and celebrated in the borough.

There should be more official recognition of the ways that rivers are meaningful to different groups, such as their religious uses or specific cultural resonances. This could include education for children and young people about the meaning of water in different cultures and religions and actively including sessions which reflect Lewisham’s multicultural heritage in river events in the borough.

CASE STUDY: RIVER POOL LINEAR PARK



Pool rocks, located on a stretch of the River Pool path, is an example of a well-functioning river space, containing infrastructure, while leaving room for adaptation and recreation.

The tarmac path that runs alongside is part of a well-used cycle route. There are benches nearby and a fallen tree has been left to serve as an additional bench. Set back from the path, the rocks by the river and over-hanging trees provide adventurous play for older children and teenagers, and smaller children splash in the shallows. The grassy bank is a popular picnic spot.

This is part of a stretch of the river path that is well-maintained by the Friends of the River Pool who run weekly volunteering sessions. On the other side of the tarmac path is the Bell Green Pond that was newly restored in 2022 and is also a popular stopping off point.

● RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This project was undertaken by **Dr Emma Jackson**, Reader in Sociology and Director of the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR), and **Dr Louise Rondel**, Research Fellow, Goldsmiths, University of London.

It was shaped in dialogue and carried out in conjunction with research partners Friends of the River Pool, Quaggy Waterways Action Group (QWAG) and Waterlink Way of Life. Further support and insights were provided by Friends of Brookmill Park, the Creekside Discovery Centre, The Healthy Rivers Project and Thames21.

Findings are based on extensive policy documents analysis, alongside the employment of creative methods including walking/on-site interviews and workshops and participating in river activities.

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