

Alban Way Greenspace Action Plan

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Introduction

The Alban Way follows the old railway route from Hatfield to St Albans that makes its way through the woodland. Opened in 1865, the route was the link between the city and Great Northern Railway. The line was in use until 1969 after which the track was disassembled, and the route became redundant (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

The track bed lay abandoned for over a decade up to 1982 when the plans were put in place to turn the route into a cycleway and footpath and after 3 years, in 1985, a small section of the route was open to pedestrians. A further inauguration took place in 1988 when the name Alban Way was used (Darnton, 2014).

After the official inauguration, a series of improvements were made in time aiming to enhance the safety and access to the route leading to the Alban Way Greenspace Action Plan which has proposed to maintain high standards of safety, access, and environmental quality through sustainable management means (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

In this report, we will discuss the concerns that the project aims to address, the process itself, and the potential benefits for the community. Also, we will evaluate the local community engagement in the project process, the approaches that were used to involve the local community, and the lessons learned from this community engagement project.

Project implementation

Aim

The aim of the project is to guarantee that the Alban Way upholds elevated levels of accessibility, safety, user satisfaction, and ecological excellence, achieved by maintaining recent enhancements and embracing a sustainable management approach.

Objectives

To create the idea of a welcoming place the project will upkeep a superior level of accessibility for travel alongside the pathway while identifying chances to establish extra connections with neighboring locales. Guarantee that all signage along the route is up-to-date and well-

maintained and explore further possibilities for informative or welcoming signs. Attain and sustain a neat and orderly pathway. Verify that surfaces, amenities, and drainage systems are operational and well-maintained (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

One of the key elements of the project is to ensure that the surrounding environment is kept under proper condition and the route is blended with nature by maintaining the practice of tree trimming and grass verge management while recognizing chances to enhance habitat formation. Detect and eliminate invasive non-native species of plants, substituting them with native varieties. Execute surveillance of wildlife and tree diseases employing suitable optimal methods as needed and collaborating with external specialists to ensure a healthy wildlife stock (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

Heritage awareness is another aspect that must be strongly considered as it can educate the community to value and subsequently participate as volunteers in the project. Hence, it is imperative to safeguard and restore historical elements and informative displays. Promoting the use of the route through a campaign to encourage respectful common use by distributing to local groups the Alban Way leaflet (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

Attracting the local community to be part of the site management is another key objective that will add recreational value to the route. Creating opportunities for the residents to craft artworks and install them along the route to enhance the respectful utilisation of the site will build strong social and cultural bonds between community members and will decrease the chances of anti-social behavior (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

The management process will prioritise sustainability, ensuring that all operations are carried out in an environmentally conscientious manner. Moreover, efforts will be made to secure funding from grant organizations, enabling the implementation of initiatives that extend beyond routine annual maintenance (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

Target Stakeholders

Local community organizations, neighborhood associations, and environmental groups may play a vital role in supporting the action plan, contributing to its development, organising events or activities along the Alban Way that will attract local newspapers, radio stations, social media influencers, and online platforms subsequently increasing spread of awareness about the project, events, and achievements.

Local schools, colleges, and educational centers can incorporate the Alban Way into their curricula or educational programs, making them potential partners in raising awareness and promoting responsible use. Artists, cultural organizations, and public art initiatives may engage with the greenspace through art installations, performances, or events, contributing to its overall ambiance and appeal.

The route could attract tourists, cyclists, runners, and outdoor enthusiasts, potentially benefiting the local tourism and hospitality sector. Ensuring a safe, accessible, and pleasant experience for them will be a priority. Collaboration with these industries may enhance the overall visitor experience.

Local government bodies, such as city councils or park departments, will have a significant role in implementing and overseeing the action plan. They may also provide funding, resources, and regulatory support for the project and groups dedicated to biodiversity conservation, habitat restoration, and ecological sustainability.

Businesses located near the Alban Way may be impacted by increased foot traffic, tourism, or other economic activities resulting from the action plan's implementation. Engaging local businesses can foster collaboration and mutual benefits.

Potential benefits

The action plan can lead to the transformation and improvement of the Alban Way into a well-maintained, attractive, and accessible greenspace that offers recreational opportunities and a natural retreat for residents and visitors. The greenspace provides a place for people to engage in physical activities, outdoor leisure, and social interactions, promoting overall health and well-being. The plan's focus on sustainable management and habitat preservation contributes to the protection of local flora and fauna, supporting urban biodiversity and ecological balance.

Greenspace can serve as an outdoor classroom, raising awareness about local ecosystems, sustainability practices, and environmental issues, particularly for schools and educational institutions.

Trees and vegetation along the Alban Way can contribute to reducing the urban heat island effect, providing shade, and cooling benefits to pedestrians and cyclists. Encouraging cycling and walking can lead to fewer vehicle trips, reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and contributing to a more environmentally friendly transport mode. Effectively

managed greenspaces can contribute to flood control, stormwater management, and soil erosion prevention, enhancing the area's resilience to extreme weather events.

The action plan's community engagement efforts can foster a sense of ownership and pride among residents, promoting a stronger sense of community and social connections. The greenspace's visual appeal, including natural landscapes and art installations, can improve the aesthetic quality of the urban environment, making it more enjoyable for everyone and contributing to higher property values and overall property appeal for nearby residents.

A well-developed green space can attract tourists, promoting local businesses such as cafes, shops, and accommodations, which can stimulate economic growth in the area. Incorporating art installations and cultural elements along the pathway can create a unique sense of place, fostering creativity and cultural appreciation among residents and tourists.

Alban Way community engagement process, funding, and outcomes

Community engagement is one of the key priorities of the project as this factor lays a solid path towards a healthy society and subsequently can improve the chances of having long-lasting outcome benefits. To increase community awareness about the project, several exhibition events were put in place. Events like "The Varying Fortunes of the Hatfield & St Albans Railway", "Bringing the History of Smallford Station & Alban Way to Life", "Improving the Environment around Smallford Station", "Short Walks from Smallford – Nast Hyde as part of our Heritage Open Day" (The Smallford Station and Alban Way Heritage Society, 2019).

During Celebrating of the 150th Anniversary of the Opening of the Hatfield-St Albans Railway Line, the local community received a comprehensive educational and recreational program. Fliers were delivered two weeks in advance to 4000 homes along and close to The Alban Way to inform the residents of the upcoming events. A wide selection of events including exhibitions, walks, cycling, and music concerts were offered to the public. A wide number of stakeholders were involved and took an active part in promoting and organising the events (Lewis, 2015).

The success of the improvement project owes much to the significant contribution of volunteers. Community members from WelHatCycling, Sustrans East Herts, and residents of the local area came together to remove 44 bags of litter from the Hatfield segment of the Alban Way (Edwards, 2023).

A substantial group of Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Management Service conservation volunteers have generously dedicated their time to engage in diverse activities, such as planting hedges, managing vegetation, and setting up signs and interpretation panels (St Albans City and District Council, 2018).

Apart from volunteers, project was mainly supported and delivered by the Millennium Commission, National Cycle Network, Countryside Commission, St Albans City and District Council, Welwyn Hatfield Council, Herts County Council (Environment), Countryside Management Service, Groundwork Hertfordshire, Watling Chase Community Forest, RMC (St Albans Sand and Gravel Co. Ltd.) and the University of Hertfordshire using the funds from developer contributions and UK government sustainable travel. In total 165,000 £ were made available from government funding (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

Alban Way received several improvements that increased the accessibility through the route resurfacing and repairs undertaken to steps and ramps. To facilitate route navigation, direction informational signages were improved and added to facilitate the route navigation and all local destinations have been painted onto the road surface. Various vegetation management works have been conducted to increase enlightenment of the path to reveal the heritage features like bridge structures, old railway platforms, and former train stations. Smallford station and Cottonmill Lane bridge can serve as examples. To add educational value to the route, several informational boards have been designed and installed along the route to provide information regarding the history and wildlife of the place (St Albans City and District Council, 2023).

Lessons learned

The success of the project was closely tied to active engagement with the local community. Involving residents, community groups, and stakeholders increases the sense of ownership, and generates strong social connections inside the community. A diverse partnership approach can lead to innovative ideas and shared responsibilities. Restoring heritage features and incorporating them into the greenspace design not only preserves historical identity but also enriches the visitor experience, fostering a deeper connection with the area and contributing to raising awareness about the environment, history, and cultural significance of the greenspace. Clear communication through signage, online platforms, and community events helps build trust and maintain public interest. Incorporating sustainability principles throughout the planning and implementation process is essential. Integrating ecological conservation, responsible land management, and sustainable transportation practices contributes to long-term success.

Conclusion

The Alban Way Greenspace Action Plan stands as a remarkable example of the power of collaboration, community engagement, and urban development. Through the efforts of local authorities, environmental organizations, businesses, residents, and numerous stakeholders, the Alban Way has been transformed from an abandoned rail corridor into a vibrant green space. Moving ahead, the achievements of the Alban Way Greenspace Action Plan inspire future projects. They show how working together can make good things happen and remind us that green spaces are places where communities grow, nature thrives, and the local spirit shines.

The accomplishments achieved through the Alban Way Greenspace Action Plan extend beyond the improvements to the physical landscape. They increased social bonds among community members, increased awareness of local history and ecology, and the shared commitment to responsible use and preservation. As a result, the Alban Way serves as living proof of how urban spaces can be revitalised to benefit both people and the environment.

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