

NLA BREAKFAST TALK



# RESTORING LONDON'S RIVERS

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**The effective restoration of London's rivers can provide improved natural habitats for wildlife and a better space for human recreation. Designed imaginatively, they can also even help to reduce crime and the fear of crime and contribute to a higher quality of life for all.**

Those were some of the key messages to emerge from yesterday morning's breakfast talk at NLA on Restoring London's Rivers.

Restore project manager Antonia Scarr kicked off by outlining that London's 600km of rivers (with the Thames on top of that) have been under pressure owing to issues relating to population growth, drainage and waste disposal. River restoration is all about working with the natural process of the river, she said – not only the channel itself but also the flood plain and from the river's source right out to where it meets the sea. Good work is being done in giving people greater access to wildlife and breaking down previously dislocated riverside buildings from the water, cutting down walls and improving connections. But lessons could also be learned from practices abroad, such as in Munich, where measures introduced to sections of the Isar river have resulted in a 'summer playground' for the city, said Scarr.

Closer to home, extensive work done on the Lea River has transformed the area around the Olympic Park, said Atkins Principal Engineer Mike Vaughan, outlining the transformations he and his team achieved in seven years. In 2005 'BC' ('Before clean-up'), the site was host to pylons, freight yards, derelict buildings and heavy contamination from oils, tars, lead – even radioactivity. There was little access to the waterways, the riverbanks were steep and overgrown, with invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed. The constraints meant this was not a restoration project, more about encouraging connectivity, enhancing the river as a feature for people and for wildlife. Working with an extensive team of river engineers, ecologists, geomorphologists and so on, as well as the ODA and other parties, collaboration was key. And the result was that the Games had given the River Lea 'colour, structure, habitat, with wonderful value', said Vaughan.

BDP's experience of working on projects such as Ladywell Fields were also about parks with rivers, where around a third of the budget went on the river element, said landscape architecture director Mehron Kirk. Some of the 'overwhelming' benefits from the work on the 21 ha park included the increase in numbers of children playing in the river, and a 276% increase in park usage. But key to the project's success was looking 'cohesively' at the whole site, and working with nature, said Kirk. The project resulted in benefits including reduced flood risk, value for money, new connections along the river and a strong new identity for the area, creating one of 'London's hidden rural gems'. The challenges along the way related to the many approvals that were needed, a reluctance to change which manifested itself through consultation, and negative PR arising from the removal of vegetation.

Finally, the conference heard a tongue-in-cheek presentation from James Bowdidge, honorary secretary of the Tyburn Angling Society, who showed his vision for the restored river, complete with a 'demolition zone' which takes in Buckingham Palace in phase two. Bowdidge said he had in mind a 'reverse rights of light' idea to help fund the project, where he will seek 'betterment' from properties near the restored river that benefit from the improved aspect it will bring. 'We have a dream', he said, 'that the Tyburn runs again through the water meadows of Berkeley Square.'

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