

Conversations with **CANAL & RIVER TRUST** Community Wellbeing Coordinators



INTERVIEWS: EMMA LOVE

PHOTOS: EMMA LOVE, CRT & SEAN PAYNE

IT WAS GREAT TO CHAT WITH CAROL AND SEAN ABOUT THEIR ROLES AS CANAL & RIVER TRUST COMMUNITY WELLBEING COORDINATORS. THEIR WORK IS FOCUSED ON CREATING ACTIVITIES ON AND BESIDE OUR BEAUTIFUL BLUE SPACES WHEN RECENTLY ANNOUNCED GOVERNMENT CUTS ARE THREATENING THE VERY WATERWAYS WE ALL LOVE TO PADDLE.

Carol Burrell



PHOTO: CANAL & RIVER TRUST

What is your project called?

I am the Canal & River Trust Community Wellbeing Coordinator for people in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. My project is called Waterways Wellbeing, and our focus is on creating activities on or near the waterways to support mental wellbeing.

Why is wellbeing part of what the Canal & River Trust provide?

Wellbeing is one of the priorities for the Trust – the public's perception tends to think that we are a charity focused just on managing the infrastructure of our waterways, but there is a lot more that we do. This includes looking after biodiversity, holding the guardianship of 2,000 miles of canals, navigable rivers, reservoirs, and a wide range of heritage buildings and structures in England and Wales.

During lockdown, the waterways were one of the few public spaces we could go to. As a Trust, we were so pleased to observe these spaces being used, and we wanted to continue to support and build upon this momentum within a wellbeing context by providing activities by and on the water.



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

"I was struggling with foreign environment and settlement issues. On the water, I found peace of mind. It is the best place for daydreaming."

Heiman

When did your project start?

Waterways Wellbeing started in 2021, and we were part of seven test sites in the UK that were picked to deliver green space activities. My first year's funding was for working with local partners in Nottingham city, including a local community food bank, a photographer, and the Notts County Foundation. That first year was fantastic, and we were pleased to achieve our targets. Because of this success, funding was extended, and my geographical remit now includes parts of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

Tell me about why a lot of the work you do is focused on delivering in Nottingham city.

Much of our focus is on Nottingham city because deprivation is higher, and we like to deliver our projects where the need is greatest in terms of individuals struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, there are culturally diverse communities living close to the waterways and do not realise these blue spaces are literally at their backdoor.

How do you spread the word about your project?

I go to community groups based near the waterways, including those in Sneinton, the Meadows, Radford and Hyson Green - we know that approximately 75,000 people live within 1km of our waterways, which is approximately a 15-minute walk. This means participants do not have to fund transport to access our project, which can be a real barrier. This programme is promoted city and county-wide.

food and foraging, arts and crafts, and men's mental health matters group.

Do you find cultural diversity in the local communities is represented by those who choose to participate in your project?

We always want to increase representation but remember, many cultural barriers remain. It takes a lot of time, understanding and investment in building confidence and breaking these barriers down. My work as the Community Wellbeing Coordinator constantly examines how we engage with different communities.

How do you know when your project is successfully increasing participant's wellbeing?

A nice example is when we have participants join our programme because they are socially isolated or feeling lonely. We observe them connect and make friendships because of the journey they have all been on together when participating in an activity. Often, true friendships are formed, and they go on to meet outside of what we provide. Also, when they sign up to volunteer following a course they have attended, that is a great testament that we have done our job.

Paddle boarding is one of the activities you provide.

Yes, we have recently purchased our own fleet of McConks SUPs, and we offer a six-week programme for participants. These are delivered in Nottingham city centre on the Nottingham & Beeston Canal. We use an outside provider who is a British Canoeing SUP Coach, plus our volunteers to support participants. We have been pleased to have funded some of our volunteers' British Canoeing Paddlesports Instructor qualifications. This year, participants completed their Start and Paddle Safer Awards. It is terrific to witness their wellbeing and confidence improve, friendships form, and their SUP safety knowledge develop. Plus, have the additional bonus of two British Canoeing awards to take away!

What's the most recent SUP standout success story?

On our most recent SUP sessions, we had a lady who had been referred to us by her social prescribing link worker after she had a stroke. SUP was on her list of recommended activities to support her recovery, and the transformation since she started has been tremendous. She and her husband now regularly go paddleboarding together and plan to meet up with other paddleboarders in the locally established SUP community.



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

"I couldn't have imagined being where I am now without the help of this programme. It's opened doors for me and brought a lot of positivity into my life."

Gemma



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

Sean Payne



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

Tell me about what you do, how your project came about and its focus.

I am a Community Wellbeing Coordinator, and the name of the project I manage is 'Waterway's Wellbeing'. We focus on encouraging individuals to use our lovely blue/green spaces in South Leicestershire. Evidence shows spending time on our waterways has a very positive impact on both physical and mental wellbeing.

How are both your and Carol's projects linked?

What's fantastic is Waterway's Wellbeing was developed because of Carol's great success with the original 12-month trial in Nottinghamshire. And both our projects run alongside each other. Carol and I regularly converse, discussing, swapping ideas, sharing findings, and comparing differences. Because hers is primarily city-based and mine is in rural Leicestershire, the issues preventing individuals from participating in our respective projects are often very different.

What is one of the biggest barriers to potential participants taking part in your SUP sessions?

Access is a big barrier in my catchment area because public transport is infrequent, and participants do not necessarily have use of private transport.

How are you funded?

My role is funded (for two years) by the three local authorities in the geographical area I work in. These are Blaby District Council, Harborough District Council and Oadby and Wigston Borough Council. Waterways Wellbeing is part of each of the individual councils, Active Together Schemes. We focus on the Canal & River Trust, health workers and the respective councils coming together, providing opportunities and encouraging participants to spend time and be active in our blue/green spaces.



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

"I feel welcome and exhilarated after each session. I made new friends and will treasure the moments in the future."

Dave

You are very hands-on with your project – how do you spend your year on and by the water?

I divide my time up by the change in the seasons. In the summer, you will find me supporting people with either SUP or canoeing. There is something very magical about being on the water and following the steady rhythm of the paddle. These blue spaces are fantastic for our participants and their wellbeing.

And as the weather becomes cooler?

As the weather changes, I move the focus to Walks With Aims, which I lead by the water. This includes foraging, listening, and looking. If the weather makes it difficult to get outside, we head indoors and do activities such as making bird boxes.

Why do individuals sign up for SUP?

Individuals sign up for many reasons and may choose to disclose or decide not to. As our time on the water progresses, participants become more secure and relaxed and start building confidence with

being on the water and with us (including our fantastic volunteers). They may choose to speak more openly, but it is never part of my role to investigate.

How do you deliver your sessions?

Participants can sign up for a five-week block delivered in Market Harborough or a three-week block at Kilby Bridge. The sessions are delivered weekly, each lasting two hours: one hour on the water followed by an hour where we sit, chat, and have a warm or cold drink. This works well because it helps build friendships and brings social cohesion to our work.

Because our focus is on participant's wellbeing, we give everyone enough instruction to control their boards and lots of safety advice. Our role as British Canoeing coaches, instructors and leaders is to support everyone on the water, ensuring they are safe and able to relax. We always include safety awareness because some participants will continue to paddleboard after our sessions and may eventually purchase their own equipment.

"I feel energised! Thank you, everyone!"

Wendy



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE

"My mind naturally runs too fast, but within five minutes of being on the SUP, it slows down to a calmer speed and lasts all day!"

Jorden

PHOTO: SEAN PAYNE



PHOTO: EMMA LOVE



“It was the perfect break in the week to improve my physical, mental and emotional health. Thankful!”

Denise

Have you been surprised by how well the project is working?

When I started this project, I always knew it would work because I have experienced how being in a blue space has helped me. I was very stressed in my previous employment, and paddling was what got me through each week. It gave me a positive focus, and I would look forward to my time on the water. I find great similarities between my own experience and the feedback from participants. Paddleboarding becomes a real high point in their week. It gives them respite and a place to chat – it helps push their worries aside for the couple hours they are with us.

What are the long-term aims of your project?

I want the project to become self-sustainable (if, for any reason, the funding ends), and my plan for achieving this is constantly evolving. We are building strong links with our local paddlesport and outdoor club, Paddleplus. It's nice to see many of our participants go on to paddle in their own free time and make it part of their lifestyle.

I know sustainability will be possible via volunteers; I'm always looking for qualified and suitable individuals who are happy to lead, particularly if they can lead on their own without support from me. Having volunteers will free me up and enable me to continue to develop and lead new ideas, plus build solid foundations for the future.

A message from the Canal & River Trust:

The future of the nation's waterways is at risk, with the Government recently announcing substantial cuts in future grant funding. The cut will almost halve the value of public funding for canals in real terms compared with recent years.

It comes as costs are rising, and the impact of climate change, with more periods of drought and extreme storm events, taking its toll on 250-year-old locks, aqueducts, reservoirs, and embankments.

The Canal & River Trust fears that this will inevitably threaten the future of historic waterways, leading to their decline and the risk that some sections may have to close. The loss of this historic, free-to-access network would be devastating for paddlers across the country.

The Trust calls on everyone who uses and enjoys the nation's waterways to support its #KeepCanalsAlive campaign. It has created a simple online tool enabling people to contact their MP and voice their concerns. <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/donate/our-campaigns/keep-canals-alive>

“I loved the sense of community and bonds we developed over the five weeks; this made me enjoy it all the more.”

Sareena

PHOTO: SEAN PAYNE

