

RECONNECTING DIVIDED COMMUNITIES



OVERVIEW

West Belfast was a hotspot during a thirty year-conflict known as The Troubles and remains one of the most deprived constituencies in Northern Ireland. As part of efforts to regenerate the area and connect communities, a new contemporary public park was created with full public engagement. Opened during the coronavirus pandemic, the park has been embraced as a valuable community asset that brings people together.

THE CASE STUDY

Building shared spaces to span Northern Ireland's divides - West Belfast was a hotspot during a thirty year-conflict known as The Troubles, and remains one of the most deprived constituencies in Northern Ireland. Springfield Dam, a legacy of the 1800's textile industry, saw some of the worst violence and was fenced off during the peace process, dividing the two communities.

New places for unity - As part of efforts to regenerate the area and connect communities, Belfast City Council appointed AECOM to undertake a feasibility study – Creating and Reconnecting Shared Spaces: A Network of Connected and Welcoming Open Spaces in North & West Belfast – which resulted in the creation of a new contemporary public park at Springfield Dam. Adhering to the Principle 1 of stakeholder involvement, the first step of the project was to carry out a comprehensive public engagement with both communities, including interest groups, councillors, and officials, to make sure all voices were heard. Two key results of this engagement are these:

- **A bridge over the Troubles' waters** - This engagement informed every element of the design of a feature bridge was installed across the water to join the two sides of the new park, symbolising the social and cultural re-connection of the divided communities. Floating islands on the water now provide a new habitat and nesting opportunities for waterfowl and offer people a chance to connect with nature, supporting their health and well-being.
- **Welcome and wellbeing, for all** - Walking and cycling paths within the park are broad and bright, with open views that add to the sense of personal safety. Steep gradients have been redesigned to give everyone access, and a new outdoor classroom and community building will host cross-community events. Opened during the coronavirus pandemic, the park has been embraced by all as a valuable community asset that brings people together.

CASE STUDY

WHAT NEXT?

The key learning from this project that will be taken into future projects is to embed social value thinking into our technical delivery. Social Value was not added on but central to how we delivered this project. This included the public consultation which meaningfully informed the design such as the inclusion of night gates, leading to trust and engagement with the local community. This in turn has seen the classroom, built in a location of widespread graffiti and antisocial behaviour, respected and used by the local community.

"This is an important project which will open up new spaces and new opportunities for local communities to connect and engage. This is not just about sharing places but it is also about sharing experiences and joining together in events and activities. This will enable communities to foster good relationships for the long term."

First Minister Arlene Foster

"In building a better and shared future, we need to find new ways to improve connectivity, facilitate mobility and open up our communities for the benefit of everyone. This project in the development of greenway infrastructure will also help to support a greener, healthier, and more sustainable future for all our people."

Michelle O'Neill

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