

Part 2 of 2  
Listening to the Grand  
Union Canal

**OPDC**  
OLD OAK AND  
PARK ROYAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
CORPORATION

**MAYOR OF LONDON**

# Canal Placemaking

in the making

## Listening to the Grand Union Canal

A supporting document for the Canal Placemaking Study, 2019,  
commissioned by the Old Oak and Park Royal Development  
Corporation (OPDC) with support from Mayor of London.

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# Introduction

## 1 Introduction

*What do you love about the Grand Union Canal? What needs to change? What should happen here?*

In February 2019, the team commissioned by the Old Oak & Park Royal Development Corporation to develop a Canal Placemaking Study set up a floating studio on board a wide beam boat, Jena. They travelled up and down the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal through the study area, asking people exactly these questions.

This booklet documents the feedback and answers people gave. The aim was to reach out to regular users of the canal – boaters to cyclists, runners to residents, dog-walkers to workers – to help inform clear visions and proposals for the canal corridor in the years to come.

The boat stopped at five sites: Abbey Road Bridge, Harlesden Road Bridge; The Collective on Old Oak Lane, Birchwood Nature Reserve and Mary Seacole Gardens. At each stop, participants were led on brief tours up and down the towpath and were asked to take photos in response to the questions above.

The process had three key outputs:

- A series of interview transcripts and accompanying photographs, which can be found on the following pages, where interviewees confirmed consent their real names have been used. In other instances, pseudonyms are used.
- A single map of the Grand Union Canal in Old Oak and Park Royal, annotated by workshop participants.
- A podcast, “Listening to the Grand Union Canal”, which captures the original voices of the participants edited into a 12minute summary, which is available at [bit.ly/canalpodcast](https://bit.ly/canalpodcast).





2

# Interviews

## 2 Interviews



“It’s quiet, there are people walking, the environment is better than walking on the street.”

Lionel walks along the canal from Perivale nearly every day as part of his morning commute. He likes being around nature and countryside and finds the canal much quieter and less polluted than the street.

“This is a 13.5-mile section from Thornbridge to Paddington and it was dug by hand. No machines – just a pickaxe, shovels and wheelbarrows. And like I said, it’s 13.5 miles long, 25 feet wide, about 8 to 10 feet deep. That’s impressive isn’t it?”

Tom is a rubbish collector working the Paddington Branch of the Grand Union Canal. He’s up here twice a week to do litter picks, empty bins, and collect floating rubbish from the canal. He has been doing this for 10 years and loves his job: he loves being outside, working on the canal

and keeping it clean, but he wishes other people felt the same.

Tom thinks the litter problem on the canal is getting worse, and that there needs to be more disposal sites for boaters. There are more and more boats coming up the canal.



“I’m not against [cyclists] but they don’t have the priority and they cycle as if they do.”

Sonia uses the canal to go running because it is wild and makes her feel freer. She comes here almost every day, usually running eight kilometres to Greenford and back.

She thinks there is a real lack of respect from cyclists, and lack of care towards nature. She observes people leaving cans of beer and crisp bags lying about. She sometimes tries to pick up the litter but feels that there isn’t anywhere to put it. She thinks that more litter bins would be helpful, but that we also need to educate the people who live on and use the canal to take care of it.





“It needs to be cleaned up. There’s a hell of a lot of sewage...When you get down here sometimes the sewage is spilled out. It just makes a dreadful smell.”

Robert, Eric and Vanessa work at a local retail business and have been coming down the canal during their break from work for the last year and a half. Being in the middle of the industrial park, the canal is the only place nearby where they can take five minutes out of their day to sit down and chill out.

They think the scenery is nice, especially in summer when the sun is out and there are people about. But they find the cleanliness, rubbish and smell of sewage off-putting.



“It’s beautiful because it’s undeveloped, but what do you develop it with?”

Charles works for Canal & River Trust, taking down the registration numbers of all the boats on the canal to verify that they are correctly licensed.

Charles is new to the job and likes the diverse range of places he has got to see, travelling through high urban areas and very ‘un-urban’ countryside on the canal.

He comments on the rubbish and the negative attitude that some of the cyclists seem to have but thinks that the area is beautiful because it is undeveloped and worries it is in danger of losing its tranquillity.

“It feels like a world away.  
It’s like being on holiday.”

William is walking to pick up his car from the trimmers. He doesn’t use the canal very often but likes the sense of freedom he gets when he’s here.

The canal is also a very convenient cycle route and he feels safe when he rides here. He would like the litter to be sorted out and the standard of paving to be better maintained. He also notes that you can’t cycle too fast and have to be wary of pedestrians.



“It’s... an underutilised recreational area that people use as a dumping ground.”

Alan lives near the canal and thinks that the space is under-appreciated. He blames this lack of care for many factories fencing off their backs and shutting themselves off from the canal.

In spite of this, he thinks the area is beautiful; citing graffiti, good amenities and history, but feels like these things are currently ruined by the smell of food-production and waste. It is not a pretty sight, and he

thinks a better job should be done to screen these things off.

Alan would like to see more fuelling and water stations along the canal. He feels that new developers should be made to put as much as possible into the canal sides of new developments to enliven the edges – but he notes that the developers and their recent proposals seem out of touch with the current nature of the canal.





**“I feel like there’s scope to have some activities along the canal, boats or shows to get the residents and local community to celebrate it.”**

Clarissa lives by the canal and works for the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation. She likes the heritage of the canal and its history as a working distribution corridor, so finds it exciting to discover how the water system connects between different places. However, she thinks that some people do not treat the canal well,

not clearing up after themselves and using it as a dumping ground. She has experienced antisocial behaviour along the towpath and doesn’t feel very safe here when it gets dark. She would like to see more activities along the canal to enliven the area, particularly events that will integrate local residents with boater communities.



Rita walks down the canal every morning. She has been taking this route for the last two years as it is an easy and convenient way to reach her bus stop.

She has noticed that the canal has got a lot tidier in the last six months, but for her there is still a long way to go, and the night time lighting could be better. Rita doesn't feel safe walking along the towpath at night as visibility is restricted.

“The air feels quite clean here... It feels a bit more rural, having some greenery around.”

Harold, Mary and Alexander work at the head office of a fashion brand and are here to visit the company’s distribution centre along the canal.

They are not regular users of the canal, but their first impression is that there is too much litter. But, in spite of this, they think it would be a nice place to come for a walk away from central London.



“We like nature, we like the birds. Around this time of year, you get redwings and fieldfares. And berries along here...”

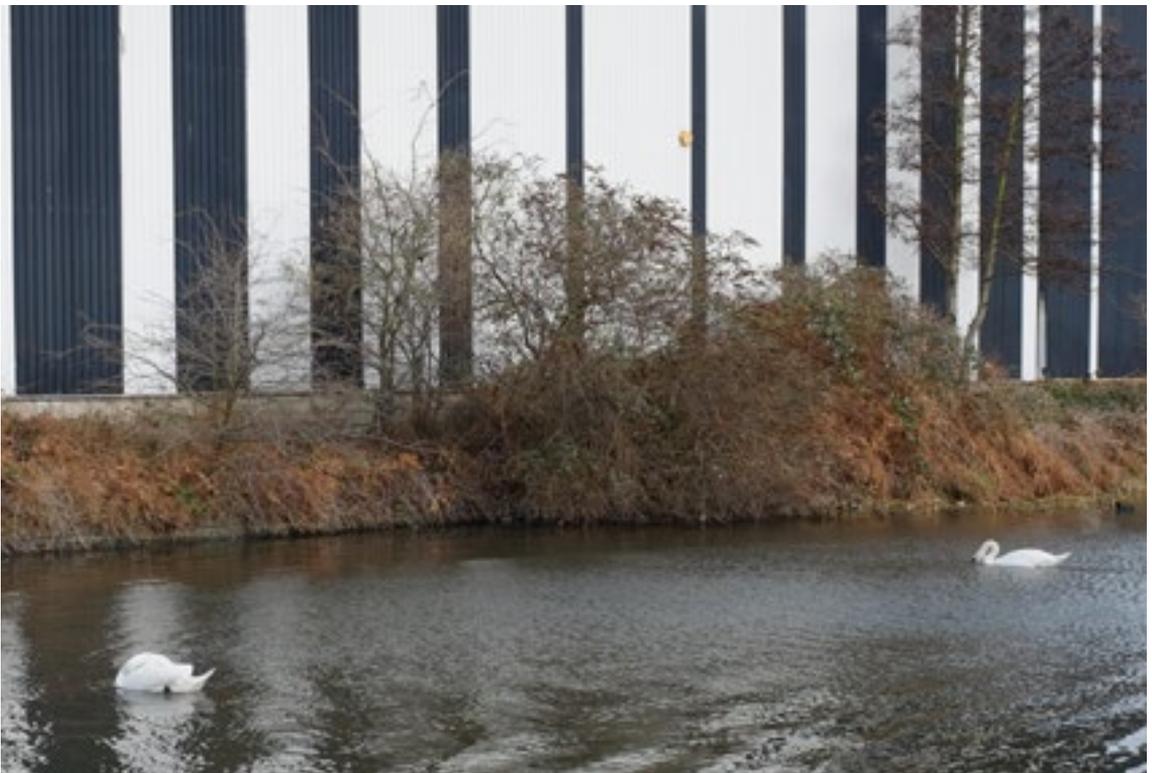
Lynda and Terry have lived in Willesden Junction for 22 years, and often walk along the canal.

Although the surroundings are ‘not very glamorous’ they like that it is different, and they enjoy walking along the water.

Lynda and Terry would like to see the

rubbish cleared, and the area re-wilded with animals and wild flowers. They think that if it was tidied up a bit, then it might encourage more general usage rather than just runners and cyclists. They suggest a boat with a coffee shop too.

They also comment that you see lots of homeless people along the canal.





Giles moved onto a boat 2 months ago. He loves being around the countryside and the green fields, and seeing all the natural life and ducks, but would like to see the Canal & River Trust 'coming out more', clearing rubbish and making sure the canals are clean.



“There’s a bizarre griminess that I like, the urban factories, the urban waterways and the natural environment just working together.”

Angela runs along the canal three or four times a week. She comes here because it is flat and easy to measure her distance, and it is nice to get a glimpse of nature.

She thinks the biggest problem in the area is the rubbish – there aren’t enough bins, and the ones that are there aren’t tidied out often enough. Then, because it is so filthy, people think it’s ok to throw more rubbish.

She would like to see more activities on the canal that will attract people, but they have to feel safe, and they have to feel like it’s a nice environment. For example, encouraging more water sports or promotions of wildlife – available to both adults and children.

“You have a break from the city, as if you were in the countryside. I think it’s very good for my mental health.”

Henry often cycles along the canal to Methodist Central Hall, where he attends meetings.

He finds that it is an easy route to cycle, very fast and very convenient, and much safer than on the roads. But it could be improved if there was a bit more space.

He would like to see the whole canal integrated into London’s urban spaces, imagining it developed along similar lines to Kings Cross.



“In the canal there’s trolleys, a fridge...and when it starts to get hot all the rubbish on the bottom rises to the top.”

Leslie has been the landlady at the Grand Junction Arms for eight years. She counts herself lucky being on the north side of the canal as there’s no through-pass at the bottom and the land is hers right up to the canal edge, so the pub doesn’t get too much trouble.

The pub gets a lot of customers travelling to them on the canal, as a destination for a day trip, or passing by on a journey down from as far as Birmingham. Leslie biggest issue with the area is all the rubbish, and she suggests bringing in heavy fines against littering.





“I don’t want the canal lit. That’s something that would annoy me, if I came out here and it was street lights all the way along. There are certain types of bats who catch things in the dark over water. They’re not that common but I want to see them have the canal as well.”

John is a local historian. He has a particular interest in the canal system and likes to walk along the towpath.

He likes this urban environment, and thinks the canal needs to have a slightly ramshackle, imperfect quality. He is sentimental about the area’s industrial past and would like to see new industrial uses of the canal,

suggesting it could offer a cheaper, quicker and more ecological option for freight.

John also has a keen interest in the wildlife and is worried about the role of nature’s place within the future developments. He would like to see the canal preserved as a natural habitat as well.



“Parts of the canal have been developed quite well. New buildings have connected to the canal in a good way. For instance, The Collective, that was a derelict building for years and years. It was a terrible stretch of the canal, but now it’s used really well.”

Audley uses the canal to get around. It is a safe and convenient route for him to get into central London.

He likes the wildlife and the birds, and the parts of the canal that are undeveloped and wild, but comments on how many derelict buildings there are along the canal from a ‘bygone industrial era’.

He has concerns about the narrowness of the towpath, which makes it quite dangerous for cyclists and walkers to be on it together – particularly when it’s wet. He would like to see some parts of the towpath widened, and opportunities taken to develop green spaces along the waterway.

James lives half a mile away but has used the canal as a route to get into central London for several years.

He likes the canal at the moment because it is peaceful, but he is sure that this is going to be lost in the redevelopment. He describes how 'on canals, buildings are all built right up to the water edge, but historically it is always the back of the building.

The front and the bit that everyone is interested in is the other side. But what regenerations projects are doing now is flipping that, and so we're going to see much more activity.'

He thinks this will generally be a good thing as people will look after the canal more, but he is worried about how the nature and wildlife will cope.

“It's messy, it is unkempt. But nature is unkempt... If you just look at the scrub over on the other bank, there is far more wildlife there than might be in a wildlife reserve.”



“If you had that community taking care of something off water, maybe it would extend to the water getting a bit cleaner as well...”

Victoria is a mother of three living close to the canal. At the moment her family doesn't have much reason to go there – it's only used as a somewhere to run or walk to places. But she thinks it has potential to be much more.

She admires the waterways in East London where there are cafés and activities taking place. She would love to see a city farm in the area where children could go to feed the animals, feeling that it would bring the community together across generations. Victoria thinks that

the recent canalside development in North Acton is a bad example, citing the tall buildings, student accommodation and a lack of green spaces and room for the community. She feels that such spaces do not have a sense of having a permanent community.

Victoria believes that it is important that new development thinks about the community, and achieves a balance between new and old, and she is very pleased that the Rolls Royce building in Old Oak is planned for restoration.





“I’m still in the heart of the city yet I have the fire going, I have a little light on, writing, I just feel like I’m inside a little cabin. You could be anywhere in the world.”

Hannah and Carlo are continuous cruising boaters, moving between moorings every two weeks. They admire the nice coffee shops of East London, but Hannah wouldn’t choose to moor up by them. She is always glad to be in this part of West London, considering it a haven and an escape.

However, she would like to see this stretch of the canal cleaned up, and more activities programmed, feeling that such things would change how people interact with the space and make them respect it more.

Hannah emphasises the fine line between making an area feel safe, and making it feel ‘taken over’, such as at Kings Cross or Paddington, which both have an ‘exclusive’ feel which she likes less. She also thinks it would be nice to get ‘users’ and ‘residents’ of the canal to have a cross-community vibe, and understand, respect and appreciate each other a bit more.

Carlo thinks this could be done by having a boat festival on this part of the canal and attracting more entertainment and events.



“The canals used to be a bit of nature, with a few birds flying around. Now they’re becoming these dark wind tunnels which catch no light.”

David lives on his boat all year round and enjoys the freedom it offers. He is a continuous cruiser, and so has to move a minimum of a mile every two weeks.

David dislikes the ‘entitled’ attitude he sees in some of the cyclists using the towpath. He feels that people are never going to respect each other in this space, and that the towpath needs to have speed bumps to force cyclists to slow down.

He is also frustrated by the lack of boater amenities that are provided, such as rubbish and toilet points. He thinks public money is being spent on the ‘wrong things’.

He is also wary of ‘over-development’ of the canal that can be seen on some stretches of the waterway. Aside from other considerations, these can affect boaters’ use of technology such as solar panels.

Jon is a continuous cruising boater, currently travelling toward Little Venice. He is a boat builder and carpenter by trade. When he and his wife bought his boat, it was in very bad condition and they have been doing it up. But he is likely to sell soon and move back on to the land.

Jon finds it quite hard living on the canal. This area can be quite dark

and there are no street lights, and he doesn't like the idea of his wife walking home alone. He never sees any police out along the towpath, and when his friends have had their boats broken into, the perception is that the police don't seem to care.

Jon would like to see better lighting, some kind of security, and more toilets and water stations provided.



“There’s a guy sleeping under this bridge here... we were trying to find him yesterday to give him some soup. But he disappeared. I hate to think what it’s like sleeping under this bridge in the winter time.”

Jeffry lives on the canal with his fiancé, in a permanent mooring next to where Scrubs Lane crosses the canal at Mitre Bridge. He feels part of a very nice community who look out for each other, but he worries about all the homeless people sleeping rough in the area, especially towards Kensal Rise.

He thinks the canal is a good place for people to walk and cycle, but he has an issue with cyclists who seem completely unaware that they’re sharing the towpath with other people.





“I love the canal and water transport, before the railways cut across the whole country. It was great, and it should be continued.”

Joanne is a local resident. She runs local history tours around the canal and the surrounding industrial estate. She thinks the biggest problem in the area is the rubbish and has been thinking about organising ‘clean-up expeditions’ involving local people. However, the problem she is facing is that this stretch of waterway feels dominated by industry instead of community. She feels like she would

need to involve people from outside the immediate area, or appeal to the factories to get involved.

Joanne feels that the new development will be fantastic, as the area has a lot of potential but has been forgotten about for so long, despite local efforts.

Francis isn't from the area but has come to the canal for leisure cycling, and to do some urban exploring. He likes the fresh air and open space and enjoys exploring the industrial architecture and heritage.

He is worried about developers changing the area too much, modernising the area and taking the heritage away.



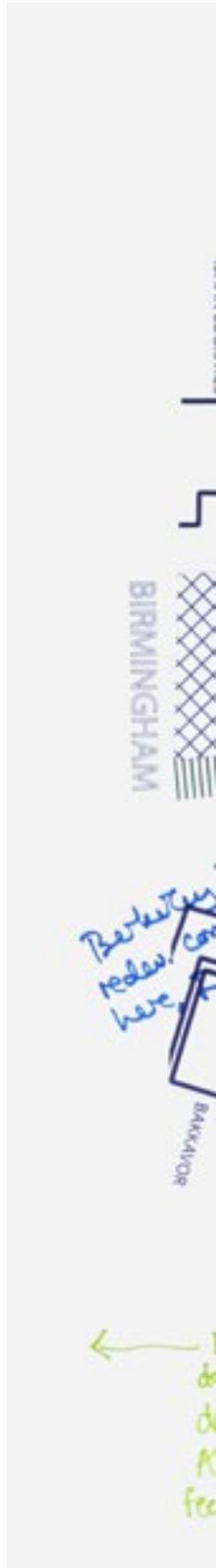
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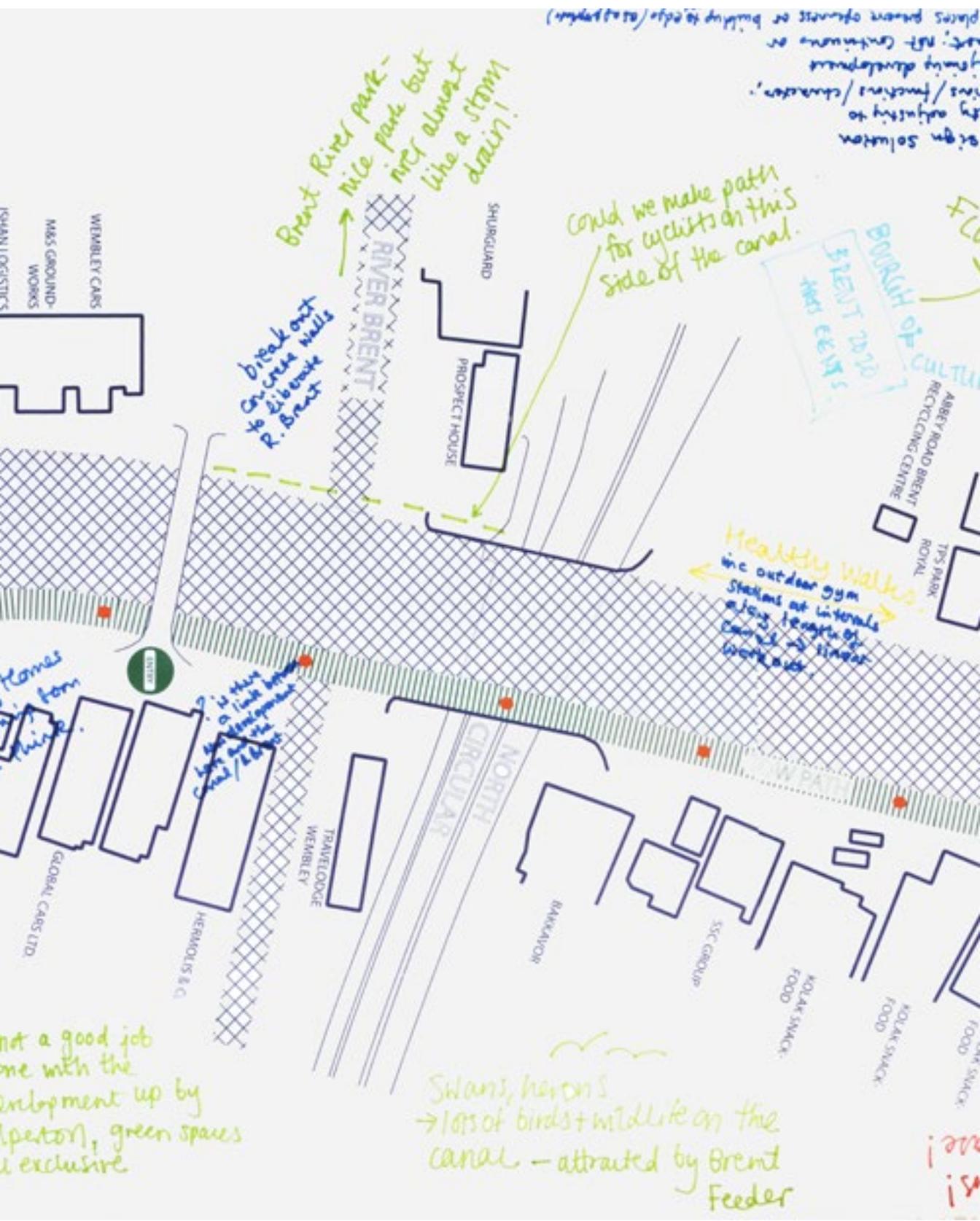
# The Canal Today

### 3 The Canal today

#### 3.1 The Grand Union Canal map

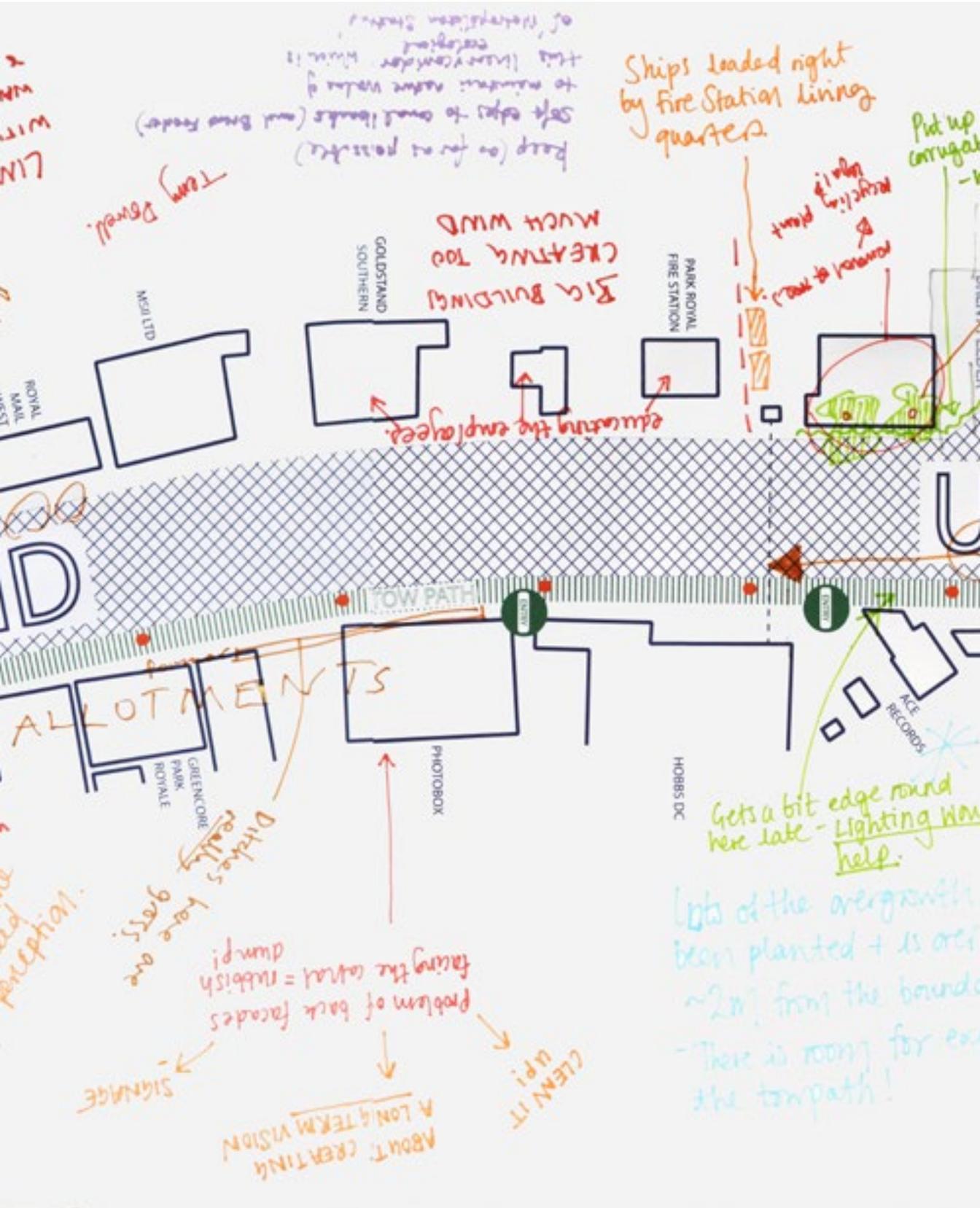
This map was collectively authored by participants in the 'Listening to the Grand Union Canal' workshops and is presented here as drawn on the days.





design solution  
 by adjusting to  
 sions/functions/character,  
 forming development  
 part: not contained or  
 places present operators or building to edge/ (as a problem)









is always going to be a seasonal place - used more in Summer.

Motivate local responsibility!  
 = peer pressure!  
 prevents dumping!  
 - GREEN GYMS  
 - VOLUNTEER WORK \*

for women walking on their own. Difficulty at night -

like "Measurite Gardens" → people such as

LORDS RUI DENS MERCHANTS

RENSAL GREEN

POWERDAY WASTE MANAGEMENT

POWERDAY WHARF

MULLENBEN LUNcheon

REDESIGN OPERATION

OCEAN CAR PARTS

MOTOR INDUSTRY LIMITED

PRESENTATION GRAPHICS LIMITED

QUORUM

LIGHTING UNLIMITED

Signaling  
 Route to 10/11  
 Sit for roadworks



Dump your FLASHING SPOT

CITY FARM!

QUITE CLAYTON PHOTOS

barrier to nature reserve recently added/reinforced b/c people were dumping rubbish.

for women the nature reserve!

Barge Day trips!  
 + conduct walks in and

Brent Reservoir.

Church interest in presence on the canal → BARGE

"GET MORE BUSINESSES BACK INTO CANAL"

great  
 6055 good-ens

Saya Giffa

BIRCHWOOD NATURE RESERVE







## 3.2 Themes and priorities

Three approaches to address the future of the Grand Union Canal in Old Oak and Park Royal emerged out of these conversations.

### CARING

People care deeply about issues of social and antisocial behaviour and their impact on the Grand Union Canal. Creating opportunities for local community, businesses and key stakeholders to engage with each other should provide a sustainable solution to these issues.

Principles around custodianship, accountability, behavioural change and management should be put in place to address the following issues:

#### Rubbish & pollution

The most common response was that the canal is dirty and full of litter.

It was noted that the situation is improving, but the canal is clearly still seen as a 'back space' and somewhere to dump unwanted things.

#### Safety

There is a perception that the canal is under-lit, and some people are too afraid to go there at certain times. The predominant opinion regarding cyclists is that there's not enough room, they're unconscientious and they can make the towpath feel dangerous.

## NURTURING

The existing character of the canal is loved, and it is important that any future changes work to retain the canal's identity and character, and where possible draw on these qualities to achieve good design and placemaking. Principles around nurturing the 'lucky finds' and existing qualities and environments should be put in place to address the following issues:

- The canal is an industrial space and this heritage shouldn't be 'lost' or overwritten.
- The wild, somewhat 'loose' character is valued.
- The canal is and has always been a working environment.
- The canal is home to boaters; development should respect this and improve boater's lives and amenities available to them.
- The canal is a rich ecological corridor; a place of wilderness in the city.
- The canal is somewhere tranquil and different – a welcome change from the rest of the city.

## ENLIVENING

Everyday activity and inhabitation to programmed events & festivals, cafes and watersports should strengthen links between neighbouring communities and businesses with the water. Principles aiming at attracting more, and enhanced, public activity on and alongside the canal should be encouraged to address the following issues:

- Boaters here feel like they have a nice community, but more could be done to connect the different communities that use or surround the canal.
- Part of the canal's charm is its limited connection with the outside world, but it's also felt that more access points would be good.

4

# The Canal Tomorrow

## 4 The Canal tomorrow

The Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal is one of the most important blue and green spaces in the wider area around Old Oak and Park Royal. It sits at the heart of planned development and regeneration of Old Oak and Park Royal, providing crucial functions and connections between and through neighbouring communities. The canal's role is complex and multifaceted, providing a space of calm, wildness, wildlife habitats, biodiversity and peacefulness that is valued today by the canal's many users and admirers, while providing important sustainable transport functions. It is a key part of this area's particular character, embodying its industrial history and contemporary urbanisation.

OPDC seeks to retain these unique qualities and ensure the canal's special qualities will contribute to a much-valued public space for current and future communities. In order to realise the full potential of the Grand Union Canal's Paddington Arm in Old Oak and Park Royal, its character and qualities will be built upon to make it a vital public realm at the heart of the wider area, a place that gives identity to the emerging development and regeneration.

It will be both vibrant and green; it will be accessible for all; it will provide areas for respite and escape; it will provide wellbeing benefits to the local community; it will continue to be a home for boaters; its ecological value will be improved; it will continue to be an important pedestrian and cycle route as well as an ecological corridor; it will be distinct from but intertwined with its surrounding communities and public spaces.

The Canal Placemaking Study sets out a series of recommendations and principles that will deliver on this vision, broken down into the three canal functions set out in the OPDC Local Plan. These are explained on the following pages.

## Six strategic ideas:

- **LIVELY BRIDGES** Public activity should be clustered at bridges where people cross the canal and can access the towpath. These should provide opportunities for improved public realm, access to a variety of nearby permanent or temporary moorings, and support activities for the diverse communities of the wider Old Oak and Park Royal area.
- **GOOD CANAL ROUTES** The canal should be a public realm for everybody. Access should be easy and legible and bring communities closer to the water. Access from the wider area should be more legible through signage and other interventions, recognising the value of the canal's slower 'pace' in relation to its surrounding context and future development, and its place in a wider network of routes including alternatives for cyclists commuting at faster speeds.
- **A BOATERS PARADISE** There is a growing community of residential boats along the canal in old Oak and Park Royal, but today this is predominantly informal and lacks supporting infrastructure. This study recognises the potential benefits of a well organised boating community to support the vision for the area.
- **GOOD INDUSTRIAL EDGES** Large parts of the area surrounding the canal in Park Royal will remain industrial, lined with businesses which today typically don't engage the canal positively. Rethinking the 'backs' of these businesses can help to make the canal in Park Royal 'friendlier' and provide wellbeing benefits to workers, local community and visitors.
- **A CONTINUOUS GREEN THREAD** The canal's 'wild' quality, particularly precious in the city, should form an uninterrupted green edge to the canal, adjusting to its context. It will range from larger nature reserves, pocket parks and planted edges, to floating reed beds, and enrich the area as a site of environmental education.
- **A CANAL COMMUNITY** Opportunities for local businesses and communities to volunteer and engage positively with the canal should be developed. The canal's diverse communities should be helped to care for it in a way that is structured around shared values, behaviours and expectations. Being part of this community should be a pleasure.



## The Canal as a place for civic & leisure activities

- Public activity should be clustered at road bridges.
- Connections between the canal and the wider area will be enhanced by exemplary access improvements and wayfinding.
- New development should respond positively to the canal and support the delivery of strategies set out in this document.
- Industrial edges onto the canal will be revitalised through greening, activation and placemaking
- Towpath equality will be achieved through providing a charter for use by all canal users and especially a 'canal community' of diverse users and user groups.
- Canalside spaces should be designed to mitigate overcrowding and user conflicts on the towpath.



### The Canal as a space for transport & movement

- Towpath equality will be supported through providing a charter for use by all canal users.
- Towpath equality will be achieved by establishing a continuous 2m towpath wherever possible.
- Public spaces along the canal will be retained and created to support future waterborne passenger, freight and leisure transport opportunities.
- This stretch of canal will be a 'boater's paradise', with a range of facilities to support a successful and sustainable boater community and providing a public realm that aids boater access.



### The Canal as a space for ecology & heritage

- A continuous ecological corridor will be created along the entire length of the Grand Union Canal in Old Oak and Park Royal.
- Pollution will be mitigated through increased ecological richness and a coordinated stakeholder approach.
- Industrial heritage and infrastructure, as well as the social and cultural narratives adjacent to the canal, will be celebrated.
- Where it already exists, the biodiversity and ecological value of the canal corridor will be preserved and enhanced.
- Where biodiversity and habitats are negligible or absent, they will be created and strengthened.

5

# Acknowledgements

## 5 Acknowledgements

### Consultees

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