Derwent River Way

A proposal to designate the River Derwent in Derbyshire as the East Midland's National River Walk

Uniquely linking urban areas of deprivation to a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a National Park

5th January 2026



Derwent Valley Trust

University of Derby

Paddle UK

Catherine Atkinson MP

Baggy Shanker MP

John Whitby MP

Samantha Niblett MP

Linsey Farnsworth MP

Jonathan Davies MP

Derbyshire Derwent River Way

The Labour Party's manifesto pledged to create nine new National River Ways, one for each English region. The Derbyshire River Derwent is an excellent choice for the East Midlands. There is the opportunity to open the route for walking, all kinds of wheeling (including wheelchairs, prams, scooters, and disability vehicles), and cycling.

The vision is to expand on the existing Heritage Way rambling route which already runs along the full length of the valley. The aim is to improve access to all by either upgrading the existing rambling route to allow wheeling and cycling, or for some sections, by providing an alternative parallel route.

Until the DEFRA guidelines are released, it is unclear on the scope, timescales or budget available for the River Way project. The approach of building on the existing rambling routes and partial sections for cycling and wheeling means that a solution providing tangible benefits can be crafted to any reasonable scope, timescales or budget.

The first, pilot, River Walk has now been announced by DEFRA and is the Mersey Valley Way from Stockport to Trafford.

The River Derwent provides the opportunity to uniquely link a National Park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The River valley provides a great combination of rural and urban environments including areas of both high and low deprivation. The River Way would help in reducing inequalities by encouraging safe and healthy travel between these areas of differing deprivation.

The Derbyshire River Derwent offers a realistically sized project. The significant progress already achieved means that the delivery of the fully accessible route can, with the right national support, be achieved within reasonable timescales.

Selecting the Derbyshire River Derwent as the East Midlands River Way provides benefits including:

- enabling and encouraging access from areas of high deprivation (health, economic, air quality) into less deprived areas including the sites of the World Heritage Site and the National Park. A large proportion of the most deprived areas within the East Midlands are either adjacent to the River or within a reasonable travel distance

- helping with community integration by providing a route linking the areas of Derby with higher numbers of non-white residents (who, statistically, are less likely to choose active travel), and those (generally rural) areas with higher percentages of white residents
- building on, and complementing, the regional mayor's plans for economic growth within the Derwent Valley
- extending the existing set of National Trails to the Midlands, and filling an obvious gap in the current National Cycle Network
- providing opportunities for sustainable commuting to large employers within the valley, particularly those within Derby

The Derbyshire Derwent River Way is an excellent candidate. The Derwent valley has a lot of the route infrastructure already in place. This could be upgraded to a high quality walking, wheeling and cycling route within reasonable timescales and budgets.

There is wide support within the general public and national and local stakeholders for the project to proceed.

Approach

There is an existing rambling route along the whole length of the river supported by a published guidebook. This is complemented by some existing sections already being accessible for wheeling and cycling.

The existing rambling route should be branded and marketed as a "National River Walk" emphasising the existing opportunities for accessible wheeling and cycling as well as walking.

Further sections should be upgraded for accessible wheeling and cycling as the budget allows with delivery of key sections during the existing parliament.

Horse access to be provided for some sections with a longer term goal of a continual horse route including some sections of existing route and some new, parallel, horse specific sections.

Long term enhancement to be enabled by undertaking design studies, consultations, etc. for further sections during this parliament with goal of delivering these sections, and the whole 55 miles of multiuser trail, beyond 2029.

Existing Heritage Way route

Extend the branding of the existing rambling route to show it as a “River Walk”:

- Additional signage
- Marketing spend to increase awareness and usage
- Publicise the existing guidebook
- Possibly create a new edition of the guidebook (maybe for publication after 2029?).
- Expand online information including guidebook information

Publicise existing wheeling and cycling accessibility

- Create publicity materials
- Organising event(s) on the route

Enhance some sections to allow wheeling and cycling (Phase 1 – near term)

- Darley Abbey to Allestree with support of, and funding from, National Highways. Planning permission in place for part. Previous funding commitment from National Highways as part of A38 flyover work. Including horse access.
- Allestree to Duffield. Previous funding commitment from National Highways as part of A38 flyover work. Route investigation already completed.
- Belper. Landowner support. Planning permission expected imminently. Including horse access.
- Wyver Lane to Ambergate. Landowner issues to resolve
- Signage for connections between wheeling and cycling sections that may, temporarily, be on road (e.g. Milford). On road enhancements where possible.

Enhancements beyond 2029 (Phase 2 – longer term)

Start design work during current parliament with intention to deliver beyond 2029

- Matlock to Matlock Bath. Derbyshire CC support.
- Duffield to Makeney including bridge.
- Chatsworth Estate

- Shining Cliff Woods (Ambergate to Whatstandwell)
- Elvaston Castle to Shardlow
- Wider support for horse riding

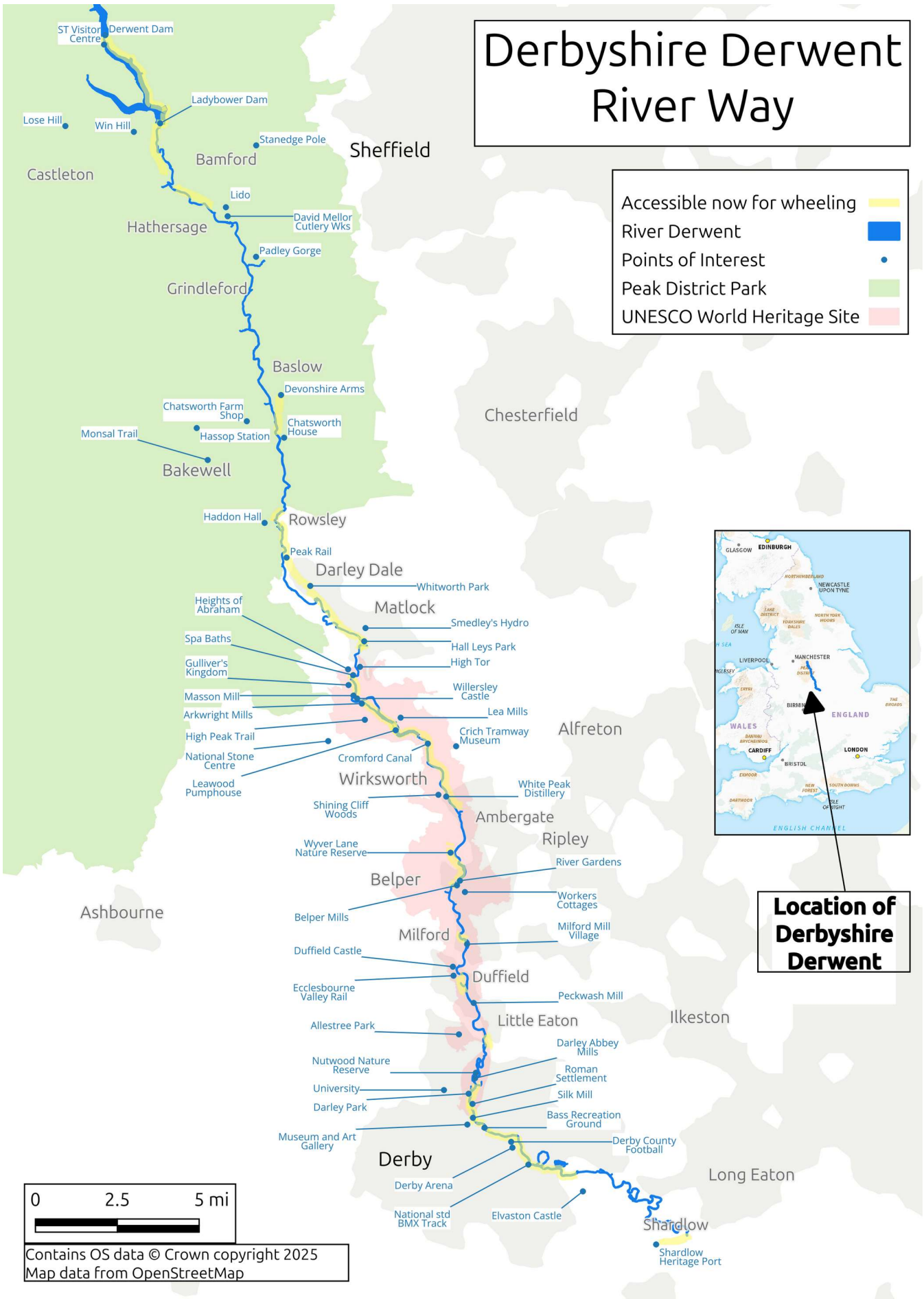
Building consensus within regional bodies

Identify and engage with the key local bodies with the intention of gaining wide acceptance that the River Derwent is best candidate for the River Walk programme within the East Midlands.

Key stakeholders will be asked to commit to the initiative and provide support, active promotion, time and possible funding. These include:

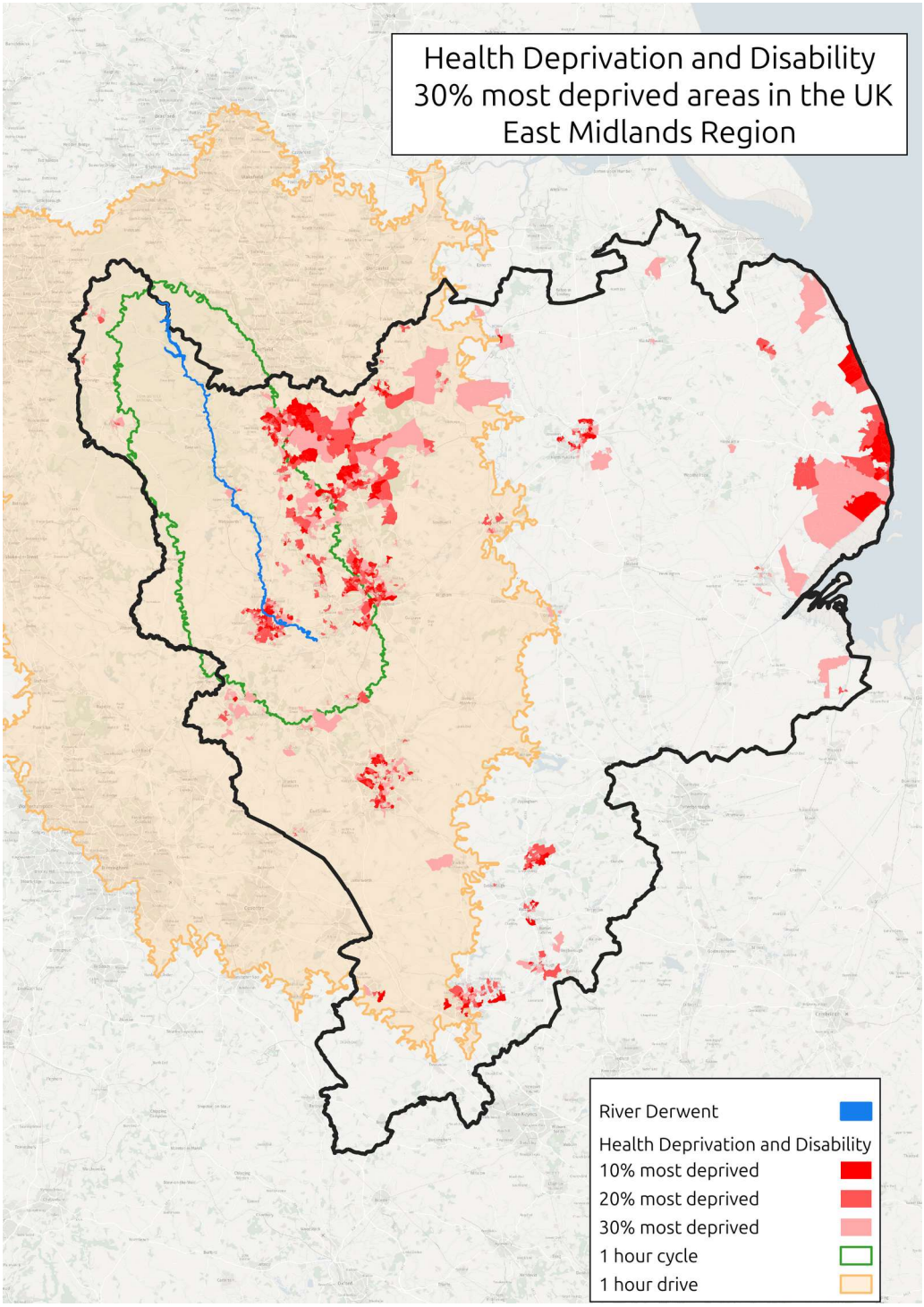
- East Midlands (EMCCA) regional mayor
- Derbyshire County Council
- Derby City Council
- Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site
- National Highways
- Derwent Valley Trust
- University of Derby
- Severn Trent
- Environment Agency
- Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (ex Sustrans)
- Active Travel England
- Peak National Park
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Network Rail

Other organisations will be asked to offer their support.


Derbyshire Derwent River Way
Accessible now for wheeling
River Derwent
Points of Interest
Peak District Park
UNESCO World Heritage Site
ST Visitor Centre
Derwent Dam
Ladybower Dam
Lose Hill
Win Hill
Stanedge Pole
Bamford
Sheffield
Castleton
Lido
David Mellor Cutlery Wks
Hathersage
Padley Gorge
Grindleford
Baslow
Devonshire Arms
Chatsworth Farm Shop
Chatsworth House
Hassop Station
Monsal Trail
Bakewell
Chesterfield
Haddon Hall
Rowsley
Peak Rail
Darley Dale
Whitworth Park
Heights of Abraham
Matlock
Smedley's Hydro
Spa Baths
Hall Leys Park
Gulliver's Kingdom
High Tor
Willersley Castle
Masson Mill
Arkwright Mills
Lea Mills
High Peak Trail
Crich Tramway Museum
Alfreton
National Stone Centre
Cromford Canal
Leawood Pumphouse
Wirksworth
White Peak Distillery
Shining Cliff Woods
Ambergate
Ripley
Wyver Lane Nature Reserve
River Gardens
Belper
Workers Cottages
Belper Mills
Ashbourne
Milford Mill Village
Milford
Duffield Castle
Duffield
Ecclesbourne Valley Rail
Peckwash Mill
Little Eaton
Ilkeston
Allestree Park
Darley Abbey Mills
Nutwood Nature Reserve
Roman Settlement
University
Silk Mill
Darley Park
Bass Recreation Ground
Museum and Art Gallery
Derby County Football
Derby
Long Eaton
Derby Arena
National std BMX Track
Elvaston Castle
Shardlow
Shardlow Heritage Port
0
2.5
5 mi
Contains OS data © Crown copyright 2025
Map data from OpenStreetMap
Location of Derbyshire Derwent

Health Deprivation

The River Derwent runs through areas of high health deprivation and disability (in Derby) and is also within reasonable travel distance of other areas of high health deprivation on the Derbyshire / Nottinghamshire borders.



Most of the areas of high health deprivation (the 30% most deprived across the UK) are within reasonable travel distance by cycle or car.

Derby has a higher rate of premature mortality than the East Midlands region and overall English averages.

As reported by the Derby Director of Public Health, “Derby is younger, more diverse and more socio-economically deprived than England and typically has poorer health outcomes, with life expectancy currently around 1.5 years less for females and 1.4 years less for males than the national average. In addition, there are stark health inequalities in the city, with people living in the most deprived areas dying on average 11 years earlier than those from the least deprived areas, while also spending a greater proportion of their lives in poor health.” In addition, “in 2022/23 fewer than 2 in 5 children aged 5-16 were physically active in Derby.”

Life expectancy and causes of death

Indicator	Age	Period	Count	Value (Local)	Value (Region)	Value (England)	Change from previous
1 Life expectancy at birth (male)	All ages	2016 - 18	n/a	78.6	79.4	79.6	↑
2 Life expectancy at birth (female)	All ages	2016 - 18	n/a	82.3	82.9	83.2	↓
3 Under 75 mortality rate from all causes	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	2250	377.2	334.4	330.5	↑
4 Mortality rate from all cardiovascular diseases	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	486	82.8	73.5	71.7	↓
5 Mortality rate from cancer	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	835	143.1	133.4	132.3	↑
6 Suicide rate	10+ yrs	2016 - 18	51	7.73	8.73	9.64	↑

Derby

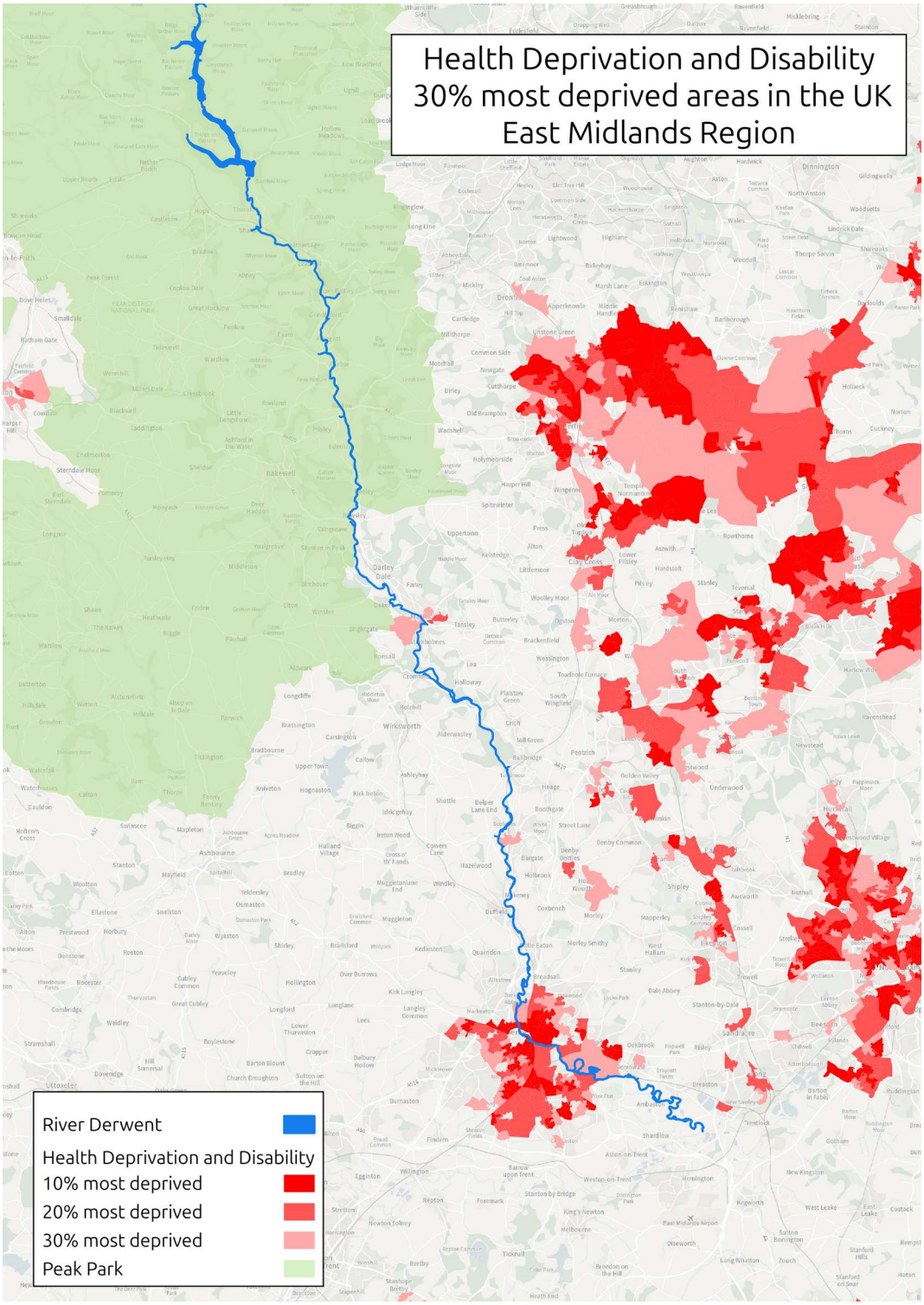
Life expectancy and causes of death

Indicator	Age	Period	Count	Value (Local)	Value (Region)	Value (England)	Change from previous
1 Life expectancy at birth (male)	All ages	2016 - 18	n/a	79.5	79.4	79.6	↑
2 Life expectancy at birth (female)	All ages	2016 - 18	n/a	83.0	82.9	83.2	↑
3 Under 75 mortality rate from all causes	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	7604	320.4	334.4	330.5	↓
4 Mortality rate from all cardiovascular diseases	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	1584	65.9	73.5	71.7	↓
5 Mortality rate from cancer	<75 yrs	2016 - 18	3159	131.7	133.4	132.3	↓
6 Suicide rate	10+ yrs	2016 - 18	177	8.41	8.73	9.64	↓

Derbyshire

Measures of life expectancy in Derby are significantly below the figures for England overall whereas the statistics for Derbyshire are fairly representative (or better) than the England averages. Creating the River Way to link between Derby and Derbyshire will help improve the mortality and health inequalities statistics within Derby to better match that for Derbyshire and the overall England averages.

The Derwent River Way would provide an alternative method (instead of a car) of accessing the river and using the River Way to travel sustainably from Derby to the National Park and the World Heritage Site.

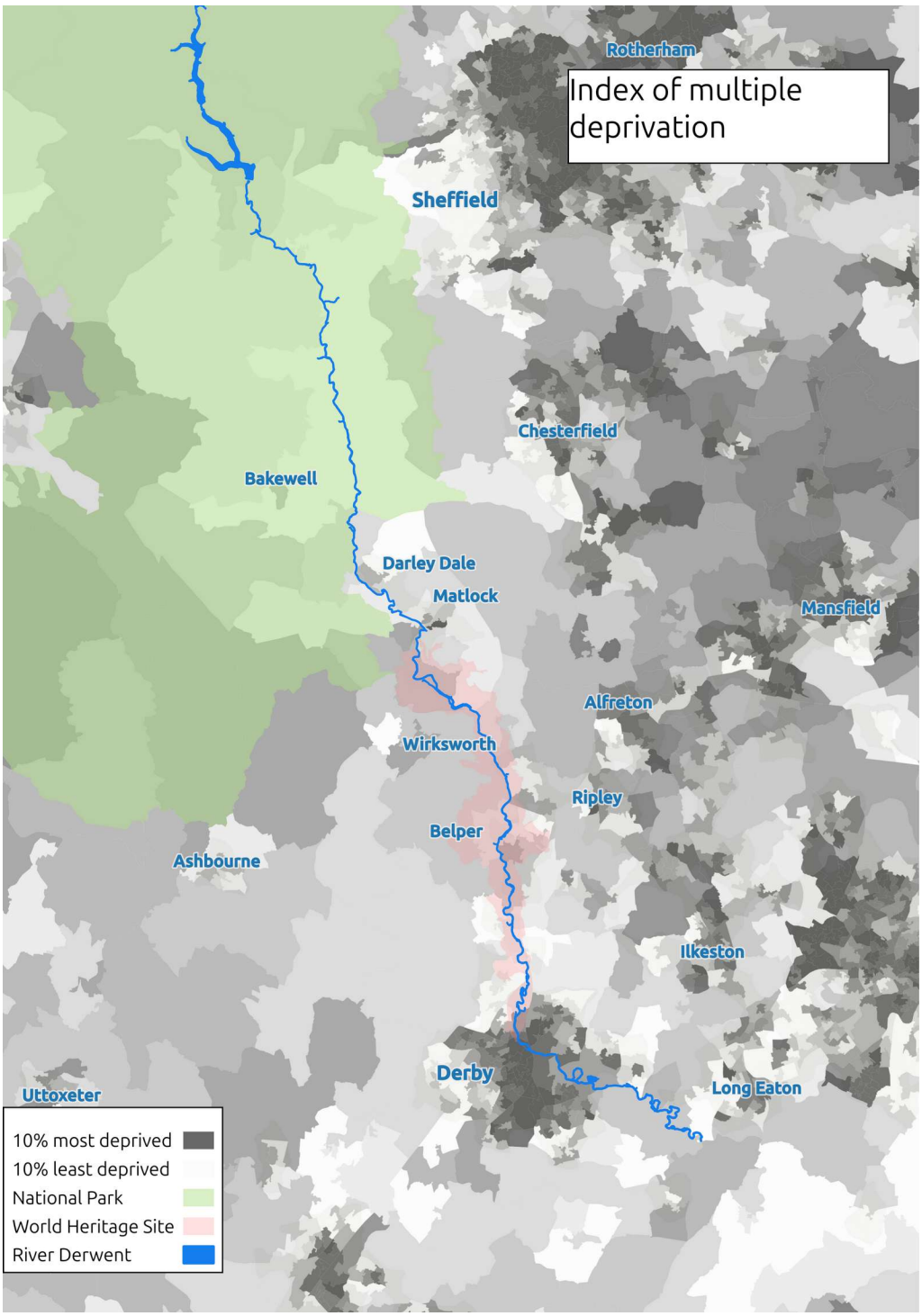


Above are shown measures of health deprivation (which measures the risk of premature death and the impairment of quality of life through poor physical or mental health). This demonstrates the benefits of the River Way in connecting areas of poor health deprivation to areas with less deprivation. This will allow the population to easily and safely make use of the River Way to improve their environment and, thus, improve their individual health.

Multiple aspects of Deprivation

The River Way provides an excellent connection from deprived areas within the Derby area to access, in a sustainable way, the World Heritage Site and the National Park. The areas of deprivation on the Derbyshire / Nottinghamshire border are within easy reach of the river.

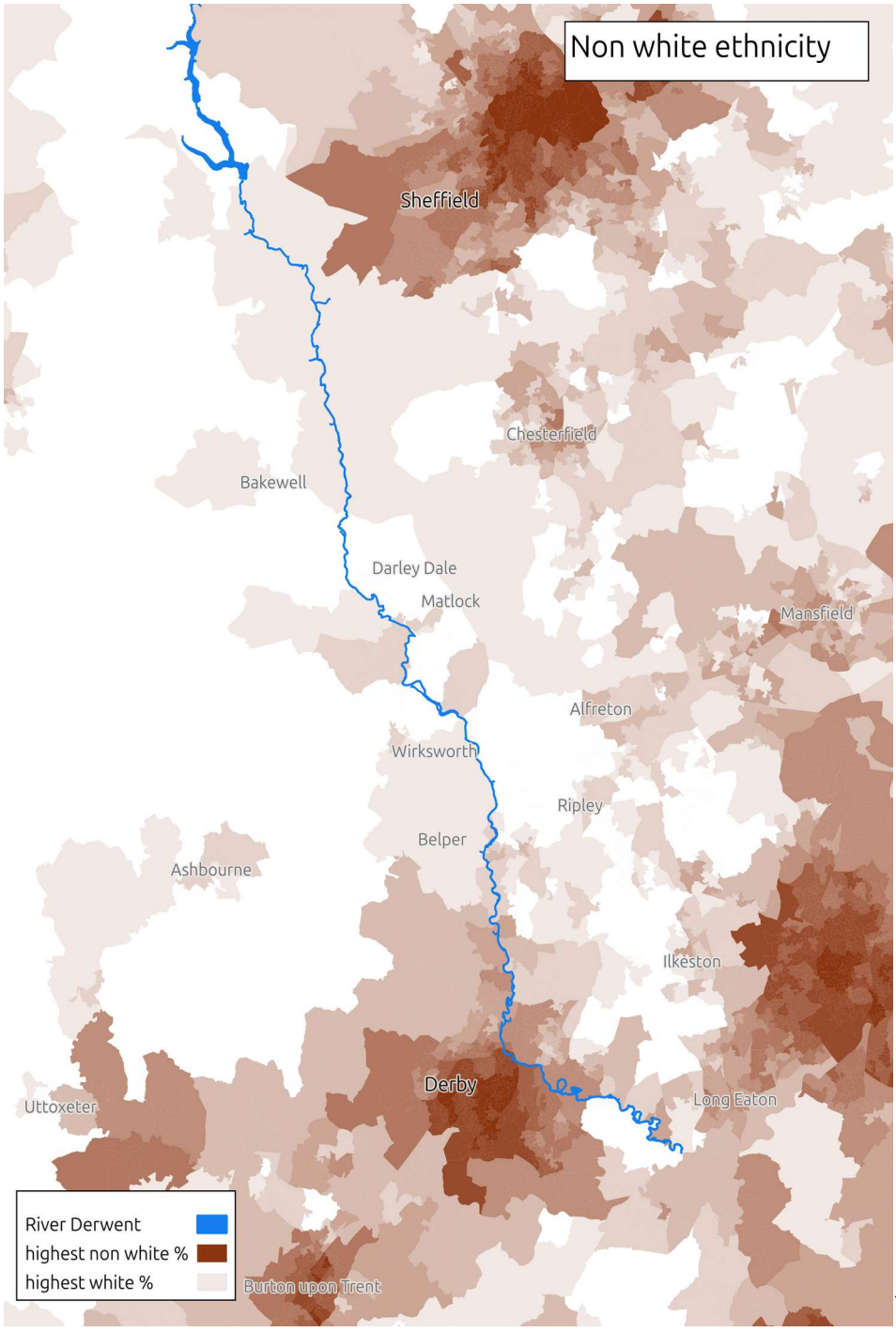
The map shows each local area according to its index of multiple deprivation (the darker the grey the more deprivation). The index includes measures on education, occupation, income, housing, health, crime and access to services and is widely used within Government.



Ethnicity

Research shows that some members of society may be less likely to undertake active travel than others, particularly individuals belonging to marginalised population groups such as ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities.

Using 2021 Census information and definitions of non-white ethnicity as used by the Census it can be seen that the River Way would help community integration by linking between the areas with higher percentages of residents with non-white ethnicity (particularly in Derby) and the areas with higher percentages of white residents (generally more rural Derbyshire).

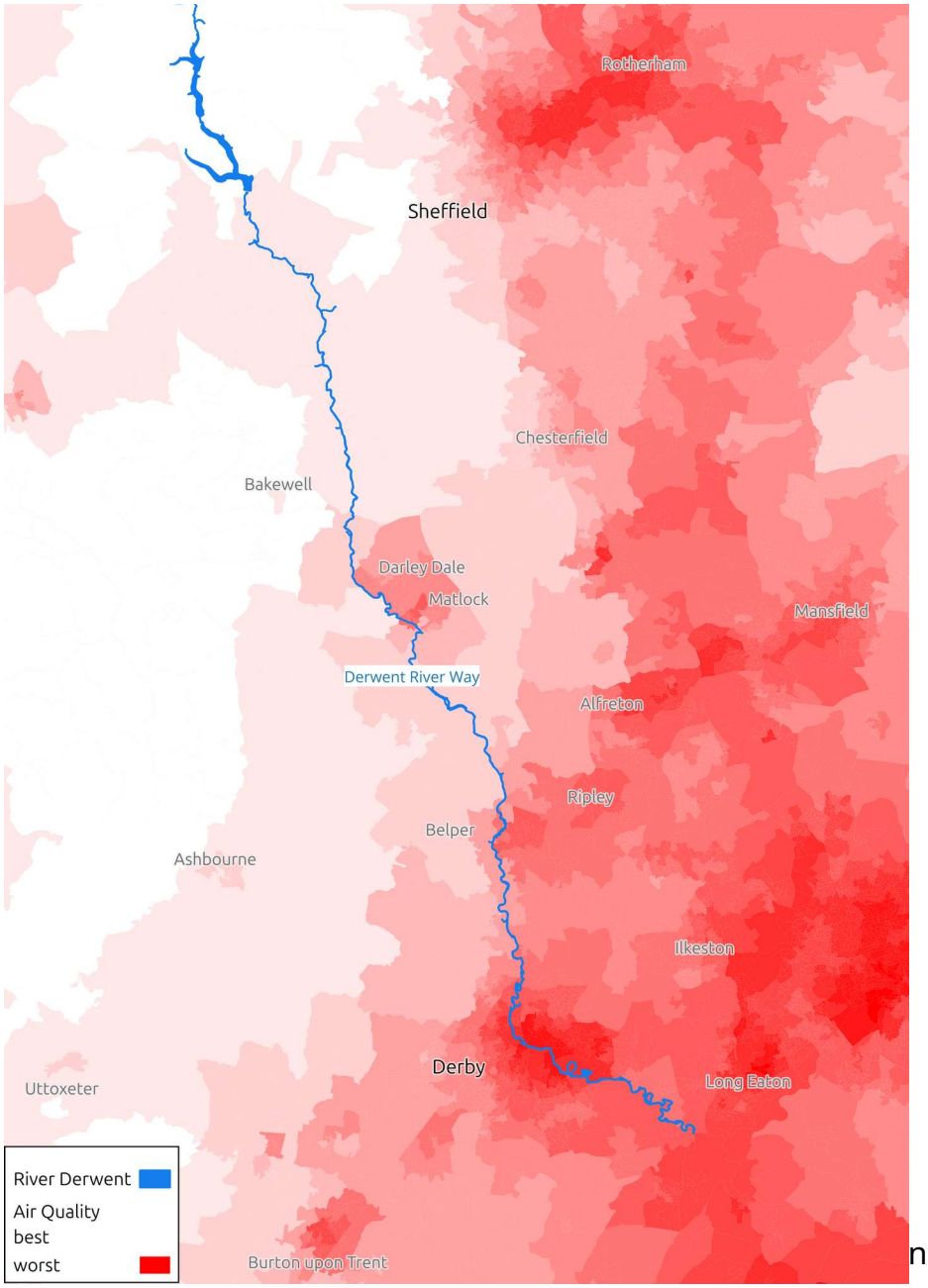


Air Quality

Previously Derby has breached UK objectives for nitrogen dioxide levels primarily arising from vehicle emissions. Derby was identified by DEFRA as one of five authorities (outside London) required to implement an action plan to improve air quality.

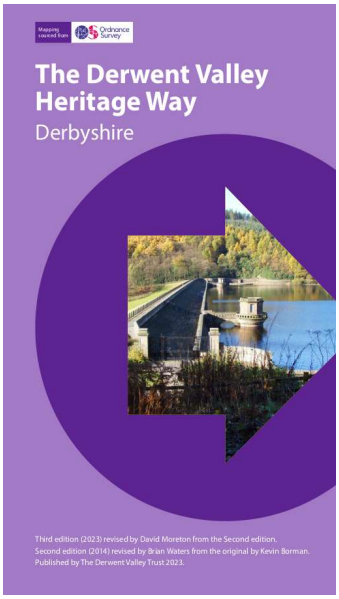
The map shows a composite index of air quality based on mean nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and particulate matter readings. Areas with better quality air are lighter pink, those with worse air quality are darker reds.

This shows how the River Way will allow residents within the poorer air quality areas of Derby to use the route to easily and safely travel sustainably to the better air quality areas within the World Heritage Site and the Peak District National Park.



 nt River Way

Current situation



The Heritage Way rambling route along the full length of the Derwent is already in place and a guide book is available (now in its third edition). Parts of this rambling route are already accessible to all.

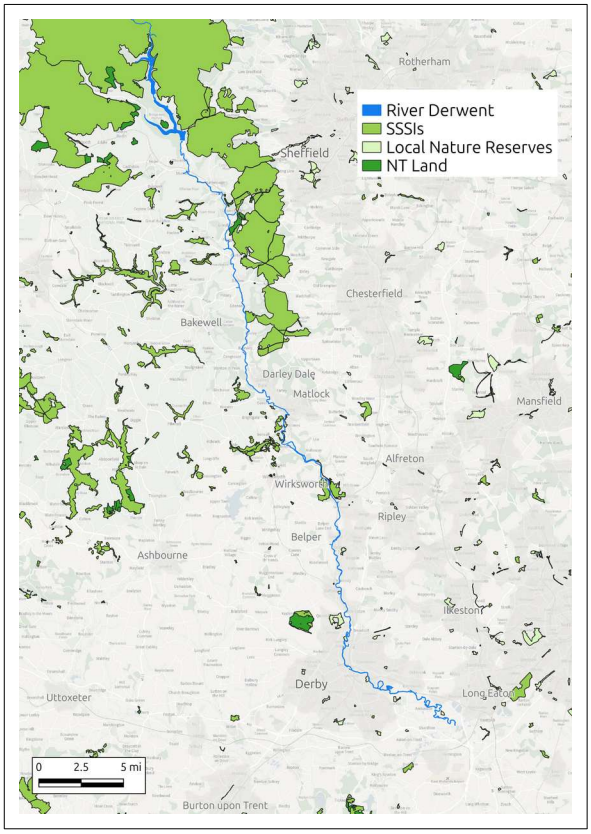
The Derwent Valley Trust has been working on a complementary cycling and wheeling route. Some sections are now in place with other sections well advanced in design and planning.

In addition, the Derwent Valley Trust is working with Paddle Peak to open up the Derwent Valley for paddle sports (canoeing, etc.)

The combination of these projects allows for a National River Way to be created that not only offers a rambling experience but allows access for all by also providing for wheeling, cycling and paddling.

Historic

The river runs through the Derwent Valley Mills UNESCO World Heritage Site. Within the UK, there are only 31 UNESCO designated sites including 19 within England. In the East Midlands there is just the one site – The Derwent Valley Mills.



At the southern end of the route is Shardlow Inland Port Heritage Harbour, England's earliest, most complete, surviving example of an inland canal port.

Scenic

The River links to, and is partly within, the Peak District National Park, the only national park in the East Midlands.

Throughout the river valley there are many Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), nature reserves, and areas of National Trust land.

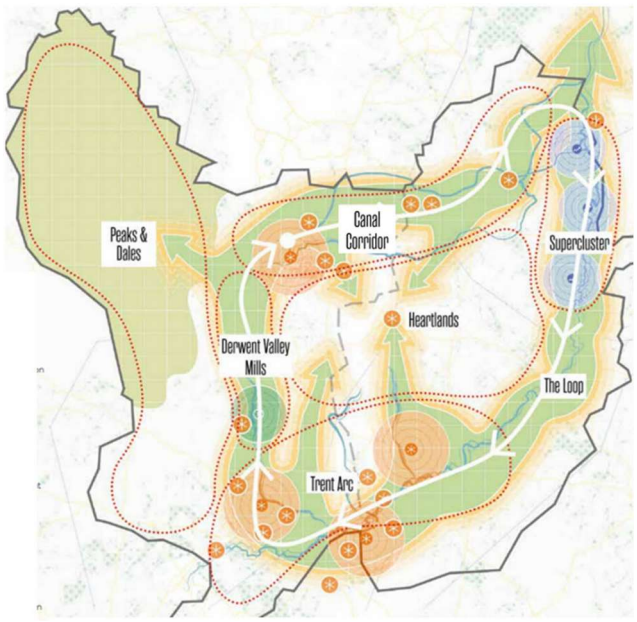
Unique

The Derwent Valley River Way would uniquely link a National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site. It links the first UK National Park with the cradle of the Industrial Revolution thereby providing a mixture of scenic and tourist attractions within a, internationally significant, historical perspective.

Economic Benefits

The opportunities for growth of the visitor economy would be greatly enhanced by the provision and marketing of the Derwent River Way including for hotels, B&Bs, cafes, restaurants, bike hire, holiday companies, pubs, and visitor attractions. This would help to address the existing issues of a few, overly concentrated, tourist sites within the National Park and extend the visitor economy benefits throughout the river valley.

There will be opportunities for farms and other landowners to diversify and grow their businesses to help address the increased visitor demand. There will be economic opportunities from providing an attractive attraction together with the associated tourism support businesses within easy reach of a huge potential demand. An estimated 20 million people live within one hour's journey of the Peak District.

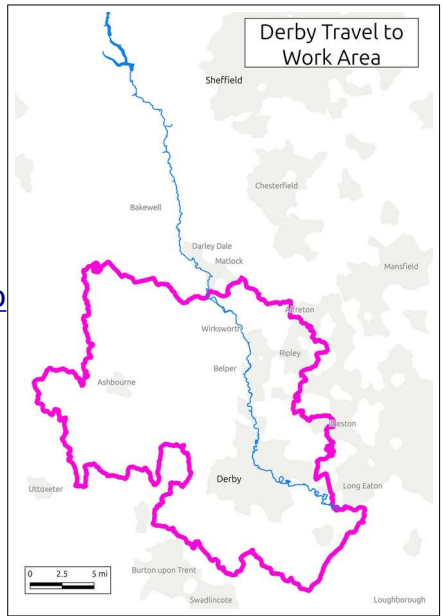


EMCCA focus growth areas

The East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) is working on a spatial plan that identifies seven clusters of opportunity to create growth.

The River Way is directly linked to the EMCCA Derwent Valley Mills cluster and also has links to the Peaks & Dales and the Trent Arc clusters.

The EMCCA is also working on developing the concept of "The Loop" as a long distance trail along picturesque waterways, designed to boost the visitor economy by bringing visitors to small towns / high streets and villages as well as outlying heritage and nature assets. The River Way proposal fits directly into, and would form part of, the longer term Loop concept.



The river flows through the middle of the Derby Travel to Work Area (TTWA) and therefore the River Way would

provide a useful sustainable option for commuting to Derby. The whole of the river south of Matlock to its mouth at the Trent falls within the Derby TTWA.

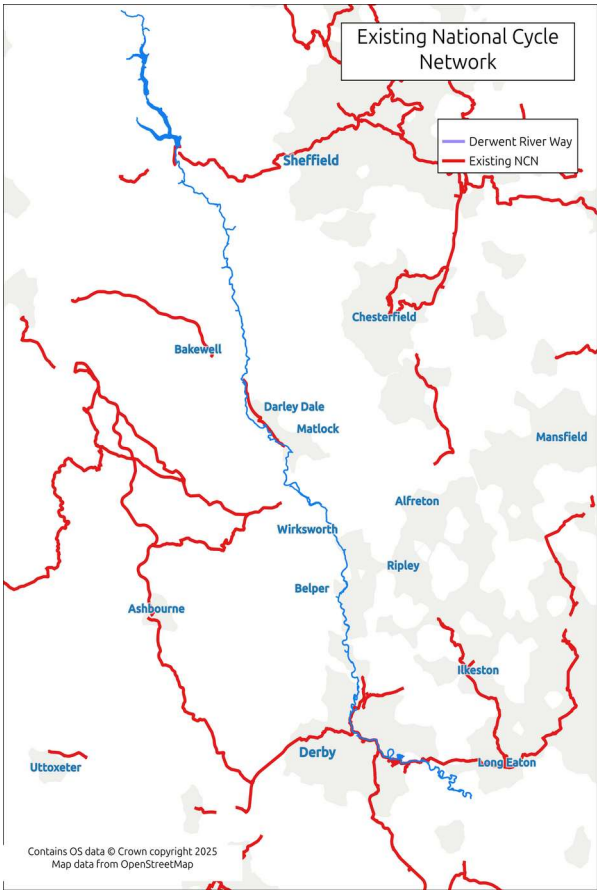
The East Midlands is projected to be the fastest growing region (in terms of population) with a projected increase of 7% by 2028.

Improving existing networks

There are currently 16 National Trails in the UK. Wheeling and cycling are only possible on the full length of two. The Derwent River Way would help to fill the huge gap in the Midlands where, except for a small part at the south of the Pennine Way and Pennine Bridleway, there are currently no National Trails. It would also complement, link to, and extend the existing Pennine Way and Pennine Bridleway.

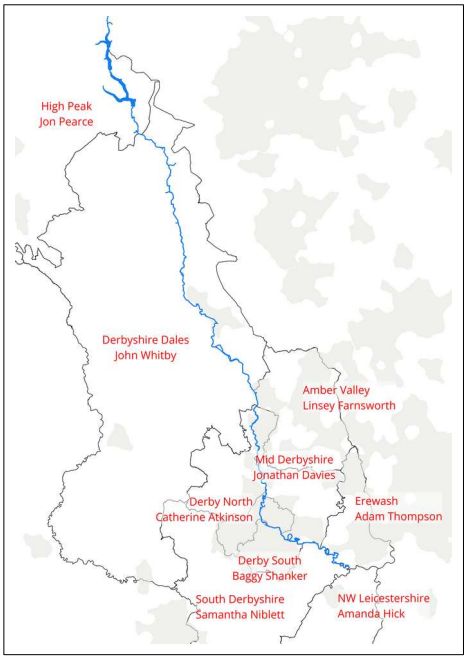
The National Cycle Network (NCN) has good connections to the south and north ends of the River Derwent but is mostly nonexistent along the river valley. In particular, there is very little cycle infrastructure within the World Heritage Site. The Derwent River Way would provide this infrastructure and also fill a glaring gap in the NCN apparent on the map below.





Support

The route lies completely within Derbyshire and thus within the **East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA)**. The River Derwent flows through the centre of Derby City.



The River Way route runs through, or close to, a number of parliamentary constituencies, which, at the current time, are all represented by members of the Labour Party.

Derbyshire County Council's Key Cycle Network includes the full length of the River Way (either already in place or as a strategic goal) as a multi-use route for walking, wheeling and cycling. The Council has recently funded a feasibility study for the whole route which concludes that the River Way is technically feasible.

Derby City Council have previously funded a cost benefit analysis of the River Way route between Derby and Matlock which calculated a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 4.80 (i.e. £1 of spend provides £4.80 of benefit) of making the route accessible for wheeling and cycling.

The Walk Wheel Cycle Trust (ex Sustrans) - the custodians of the National Cycle Network - include the route in their plans for future enhancements. The Derby and Sandiacre Canal Trust work with Sustrans on developing and maintaining some of the local NCN.

The UNESCO **World Heritage Site** Management Plan includes, as a key goal, the creation of a accessible walking, wheeling and cycling route through the length of the WHS.

The **Peak District National Park** are currently developing an Active Travel Plan which includes the portions of the River Way that fall within the National Park area.

The **University of Derby** is supportive of the project and value the benefits of staff and students being able to use the route to travel sustainability to the University.

There is wide **public** support.

Achievable

The river length (55 miles) provides a walking or cycling challenge on a par with other National Trails. However, it is not too large a project to require extended timescales to deliver. A rambling route along the full length of the river valley is already in place. Large parts of the rambling route have already been upgraded to allow wheeling, cycling and general accessibility. Other sections are currently in the design or planning application phase. With existing wide support for upgrading the full route to allow wheeling and cycling, the River Derwent is well placed to support a National River Way with significant progress possible within the current Parliament.