

Backroads – Final report, May 2023

Alistair Kirkbride, Isobel Stoddart
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1. Introduction

This report summarises what was achieved and learnt during the **Backroads** project, before it was brought to a close. It brings together:

- its contexts and purposes,
- what was done and
- the main lessons learnt.

Although the project did not deliver on its initial intentions:

- whilst the contexts have changed (from the lockdown era), the need and opportunities are still valid – namely to “open” existing local backroads as active travel routes in rural areas and for rural communities.
- the lessons on how the project tried to deliver its objectives are valuable – namely the opportunities and constraints of technology, how such a project should be led and the role of local community members in terms of their capacity and interest.

2. Backroads project: intentions

The **Backroads** project was established in response to:

1. Behavioural response to Covid-related lockdowns: a significant number of people in rural areas were getting out and using their backroads, leading to local lanes becoming a valued resource for local, healthy active travel and recreation.
2. Government’s focus on supporting active travel development in urban – not rural – areas.
A core idea behind **Backroads** is that numerous, appropriate active travel routes already exist in rural areas, but that
 - (i) they are not acknowledged as having value and
 - (ii) they are *perceived* as being dangerous due to speeding or unexpected traffic and
 - (iii) there are local problems and barriers to use – such as dangerous junctions, blind corners.

The project was designed to develop tools:

- a. *for* communities – so that community groups have ways to map their local areas for both leisure, recreation and utility use as well as to connect local villages, towns and other attractions and hubs,
- b. *with* communities - to make sure that the tools are relevant to the specific needs and concerns of different community cohorts.

The project worked with the established community participatory mapping platform *mapping for change*¹ [www.mappingforchange.org.uk](https://mappingforchange.org.uk) to develop these tools. This phase of development aimed to produce a proof-of-concept mapping system that would allow:

¹ <https://mappingforchange.org.uk>

- (1) the method to be taken up by other rural communities and
- (2) problems and issues to be identified by a host community to be used to open meaningful and constructive dialogue with their transport authority/ies for targeted improvements.

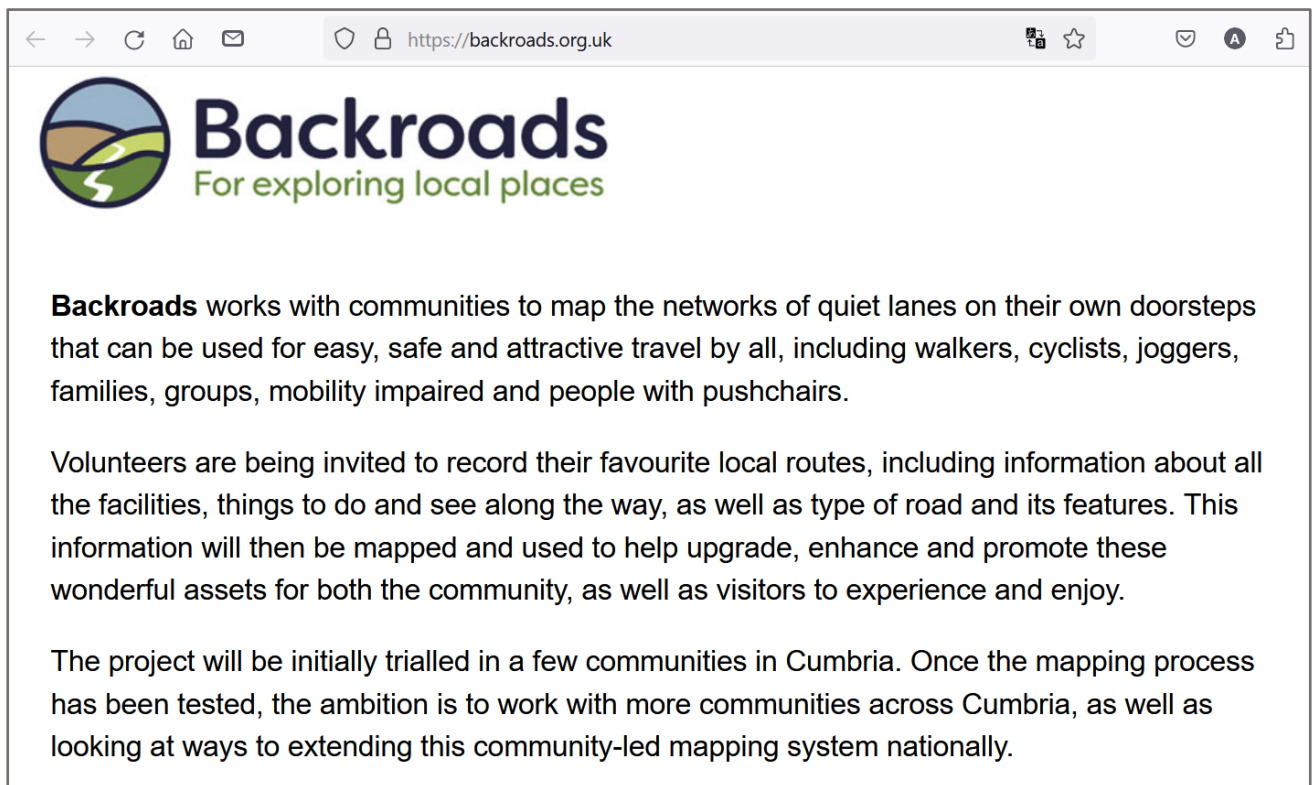


Figure 1 – Extract from **Backroads** website, including the project logo

Important lessons were learnt in this development phase (see Section 4).

3. Summary of activity

- **Logo**
Established a logo and strapline. (See Fig. 1)
- **Website** www.backroads.org.uk
A website was created that explains, in simple terms, the purpose of the project and offered a home for the interactive mapping system. The website also is a place to which people can be directed for information.
- **Initial local development**
The method was to be developed initially through local community networks (Staveley, Cumbria) – where it was possible to gain relatively easy access into trusted networks and where the networks were more likely to be open to helping in the development.
- **Identifying key user groups**
A number of specific target audiences were identified including:
 - pre-school group(s) (places to go locally with babies & toddlers),
 - families with children (walking, cycling scooting for leisure locally),
 - people with mobility issues (local opportunities for “getting out”),
 - “normal” people who just want to be able to get out and about locally and
 - People who want or need to travel between local villages & towns for leisure (e.g. leisure cyclists) or utility journeys

- **Identifying the nature of attractions & issues**

The different user groups were interviewed in meetings, one-to-one discussions and , shadowed as they went about their various journeys to better understand the attraction(s), issues, concerns and barriers regarding their use of local **Backroads**. This enabled criteria for mapping to be developed.

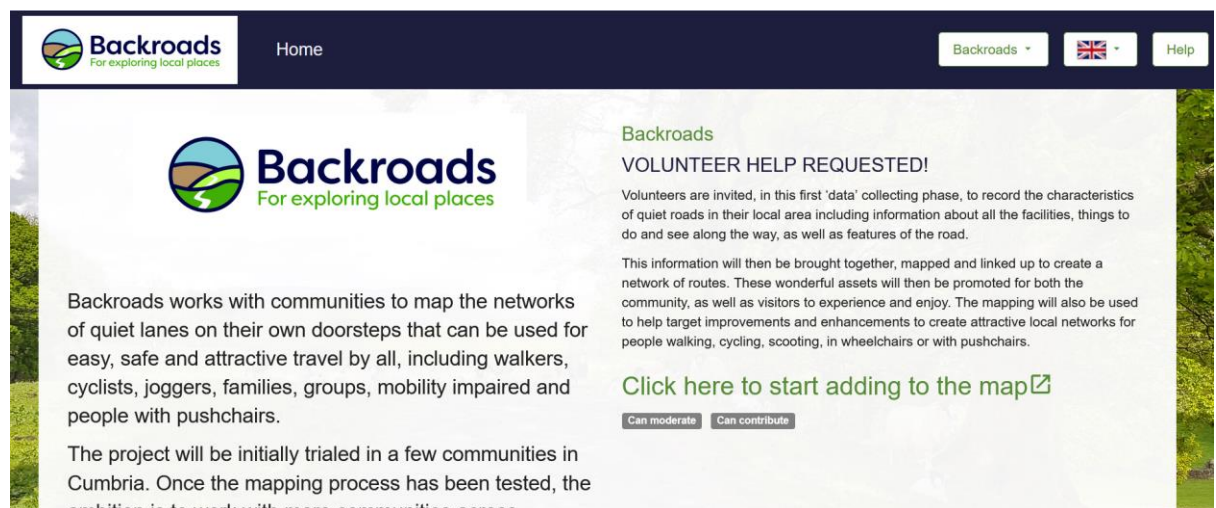
Whilst different audiences may have different priorities – in terms of what they see as attractions/attractors and issues relating to their **Backroads** - these generally boil down to a similar set of criteria when considered from an input mapping perspective.

- **Developing an input mapping system**

www.mappingforchange.org was engaged to develop a bespoke Backroads mapping system. This took the criteria that had been identified through user audience engagement, creating a structure that made for efficient mapping.

A live bespoke participatory mapping site (requires login) was then created:

<https://backroads.communitymaps.org.uk/welcome>



The website was a minimum viable product to facilitate engagement with local volunteer networks.

This was a key milestone.

The next set of tasks (volunteer recruitment for testing and enriching the mapping system) is where the project began to stall for two main sets of reasons (more details below in “Lessons” section):

- The mapping system was not particularly user-friendly, especially when presenting it to non-specialist community volunteers (i.e. the key audiences)
- It was near-impossible to translate the stated enthusiasm for the project by local people into commitment to volunteer to actively take part in the mapping.

These two issues were - to some extent – linked i.e. the inability to present a user-friendly mapping system with easy-to-see follow-through output maps compromised the “offer” to potential volunteers.

In response to this,, the next step was to:

- **Explore the development of an alternative mapping systems**

- i. *Create output maps to show what's possible*
 Opportunities to generate well-designed output maps that included mapping that would be produced centrally (i.e. not by local volunteers) were explored.
 The intention was to be able to show, output possibilities to potential volunteers when trying to recruit them.
 However, it still did not get over the user-un-friendliness of the mapping system, hence a key problem remained with the **Backroads** method that would have limited its potential for translation to other communities.

- ii. *Work with other active-travel mapping system 'authors'*
 Discussions had already been held with designers of other mapping systems to understand how the **Backroads** project could complement or be adapted based on their approach. These included:
 - **Sustrans** – www.sustrans.org.uk which created the National Cycle Network and has a long and successful track record of developing active travel routes and working with communities. Whilst supportive of the **Backroads** idea, they were not then in a position to help develop it.
 - **SlowWays** <https://beta.slowways.org/>: aims to create a national network of routes for walking using community participation. It is different to **Backroads** in two main ways: (i) it focuses (mainly) on walking whereas **Backroads** focusses on any form of active travel and (ii) as a result of (i), it focusses on off-road routes and footpaths whereas **Backroads** is about highways.
 - **Footways** <https://footways.london/> is "... a network of quiet and enjoyable routes for walking in London". The nature of London means that these tend to follow roads. Footways is generally focussed on hard-copy fairly fixed outputs whereas **Backroads** is looking towards more flexible user-interactive outputs.

- iii. *Link the Backroads ideas and principles to Open Street Map*
Open Street Map <https://www.openstreetmap.org> is a well-established open participatory mapping system that covers all of the UK. The possibilities of embedding **Backroads** within OSM were discussed with their board members, and it was clear that:
 - (i) this was possible and/but
 - (ii) it would require technical skills beyond this of the **Backroads** personnel.
 In response, sources of appropriate expertise to take this on were investigated, include contacting specific people at the Universities of Newcastle and Leeds.
 After some weeks, all enquiries were leading to dead ends.

4. Lessons

Three main lessons have been learnt from this project:

I. The need for a lead organisation with appropriate expertise, capacity & reach and with whom the ideas behind **Backroads** align.

The project's limitations related primarily to the development of mapping facilities and platforms. Whilst such systems clearly either exist for other purposes or would be fairly straightforward to develop by the right person or organisation, this project spent a lot of time failing to do this well as it didn't have the appropriate skillsets. It is suggested that the important complement to this(necessary) skill is the sensitivities of engaging with local communities in terms of *their* priorities, available capacity and skills.

2. The limits of desire of community members to actively engage in mapping.

Whilst the initial engagement with cohorts within the test community were borne out of the covid-related rise in interest in using local lanes and a stated interest in help develop mapping services, it was just not possible to translate this into community-linked action. This was probably for three reasons:

- i. The tools were not available to demonstrate a full and easy-to-use system in the process of recruiting volunteers
- ii. There is a limit in capacity of volunteers in a community, and other commitments and opportunities for volunteering are – frankly – more interesting than backroads mapping – even if the prospect of having better mapped backroads is attractive.
During the **Backroads** project, other local projects included (very) active engagement and fundraising for a new playground, and two new local campaigns - for the re-opening of the village's care home² and the Clean River Kent campaign – as the local river is a popular place to swim and play for many local people.³
- iii. A significant (c. 40%) reduction in levels of volunteering in the UK since Covid⁴. Evidence suggests that this is more pronounced among younger people – who were a key target audience for the more tech-led elements of the **Backroads** project.

3. The key purpose of Backroads is still valid.

- i. Many people in rural areas are aware of and have pride in their local areas, but there are tangible and less tangible reasons why people don't use their **Backroads** more often. The (very welcome) focus and investment on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods⁵ and Local Cycling and Walking Action Plans⁶, are great for more urban areas, but making any case for active travel route development in less dense more rural areas just doesn't fit the priorities and formulae for Government investment.
- ii. There is still an absence of local-scale information that different community networks can access that enable and encourage use of local **Backroads**.
Whilst the richness of mapped data in platforms such as Strava or Komoot is often impressive, these are generally more orientated to sport or specific types of recreation. In rural areas, the National Cycle Network routes are great for making longer A-to-B cycle journeys and for longer leisure riding, and only cover a certain percentage of potential valuable active travel routes in local areas.

In addition, whilst it was not possible to get to the point of working out and testing the optimum form and format of outputs that would work for the different cohorts, during our engagement, it became clear that:

- There remains an appetite for paper annotated maps or map-based information to be available locally.
These would not only be used actively, but their existence is a means of raising awareness and planting the idea of getting out more.
It seems likely that they would be seen as attractive across a wide range of user types and ages – including tech-savvy people.

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-64374614>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/cleanriverkent/>

⁴ “Volunteering numbers halve as Covid effect endures – report”, Russel Hargrave, May 1st, 2023
<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/volunteering-numbers-halve-covid-effect-endures-report/volunteering/article/1821334>

⁵ <https://www.reesjeffreys.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/LTNs-a.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy>

They might be a specific mapped resource that might be available at nominal cost or free- such as take-away place mats in cafes.

- These maps should be available as downloadable “dumb” PDFs.
- It was intended to develop user-interactive output with the user being able to select:
 - their desired type of activity (e.g. local walk on flat roads),
 - type of group (e.g. suitable for people with young children)
 - specific area (all routes and attractions in a valley or between two places)
 - possibly with these together – e.g. maps appropriate for groups with young children on bikes in a valley.

5. Concluding summary

The core idea and need behind the Backroads project is still valid, namely “opening” lanes for active travel through local-focussed mapping; “opening” means legitimising their use by local people by using the process of mapping and the existence of local maps to both tackle perceptions of danger and emphasise attractiveness on the terms of the different user groups. There are already fantastic networks of active travel routes in rural areas, but the barriers to their wider use are the reality and perceptions of danger.

Achieving this probably requires expertise in digital mapping development working with those who understand the cultures of rural communities; in the **Backroads** project, the expertise was the other way around.