

**Environment and
Sustainable Communities
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**



10 May 2024

**Management of DCC Land for Biodiversity –
2024-25 Update**

**Report of Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide an update on the progress of the Parks and Countryside Team, together with colleagues within Clean and Green, in managing Nature Reserves and other Green Spaces across Durham County Council (DCC) owned land.
2. To update on Parks and Countryside linkages to the Ecological Emergency and Climate Emergency reports, as well as the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the county.

Executive summary

3. The Council continues to support improvements to biodiversity, habitats, and landscapes for the benefit of people, communities, and wildlife.
4. Activities range from a host of landscape wide initiatives, through to the management of nature reserves, community conservation and education projects, facilities, and open space management. Progress is evident across all work areas. Many of the projects and initiatives undertaken are long term projects that often show no discernible differences within 12 months of inception, however, many more are obvious.
5. The Parks and Countryside Team have made significant progress on the delivery of their objectives in terms of Biodiversity gain, alongside

the wider Clean & Green adaption of current open space management to benefit wider biodiversity goals, developed through the recent Ecological Emergency Action Plan, (EEAP). The progress within this context is refers to condition assessments of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), linkages to other projects and continuing delivery of programmes highlighting the issues referred to here. This progress is reported quarterly to the EEAP Working Group.

6. The EEAP will soon feed into a County-wide Local Nature Recovery Plan, the development of which has seen progress in terms of public consultation. Countryside and technical services have been invited to input to the LNRS to give guidance on urban and peri-urban spaces within the strategy. The Ecology team are leading on the LNRS as the designated authority within the area.
7. The Parks and Countryside Team continue to deliver effective management for biodiversity across their 1300-hectare estate, which includes Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites and Destination Parks. Linking to point 5, the focus for new assessments will be on the LWS assemblage with this work starting this Spring.
8. The Clean and Green Service now maintain 45 areas of meadow and wildflowers across the county. No new areas are currently planned until the biodiversity strategy is in place for the service. When this is complete, a more strategic and outcome-based approach can be taken in the selection of new sites. This will also partner with the LNRS.
9. The Teams have effectively communicated key messages relating to biodiversity and climate change themes to a wide variety of schools and local communities. Specialist community projects and volunteering opportunities have been delivered across the county. These have been targeted to facilitate a greater understanding of the value of biodiversity and of the countryside sites within people's own neighbourhoods and promote awareness of a wider nature recovery strategy and the impact of climate change. Groups engaged include primary and secondary schools, university/college students, pre-school children, groups of young people, adult groups, and retired communities.

Recommendation

10. That Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
 - a) Note that continued effective management of nature reserves, other countryside sites, and green spaces across Durham County Council is contributing significantly to biodiversity protection and gain.

- b) Note the progress made in delivering the linked objectives of the Parks and Countryside Service and Durham County Council's Ecological Emergency and Climate Emergency reports.
- c) Recognise the progress that has been made in the development of links between the Parks and Countryside Service and the delivery of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the county. More work is needed in this area as the LNRS develops but Services remain committed to supporting the effective development of this strategy and aiding its delivery.
- d) Recognise that although a significant level of work has been undertaken and is continuing, longer term risk is present due to the temporary nature of the additional staff resource provided in 2022/23. Resource requirement beyond the 2024-25 financial year needs consideration to ensure the protection of biodiversity management and community buy-in for the future.
- e) As per (d) above, whilst there is a plan to determine the condition of LWS held within the Countryside Estate, there is no additional resource available to carry out any of the work that may be deemed necessary to either return the sites to good condition, nor maintain current condition.

Background

- 11. At its meeting on 22 July 2022 the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed its work programme for the ensuing year. Included within the work programme was an item to come to formal committee on the management of parks and green spaces across DCC owned land.
- 12. A meeting was attended by the Principal Parks and Countryside Manager on 24 February 2023 where members were provided with an overview of the management of DCC owned land for biodiversity. The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee then attended a visit to Local Nature Reserves and open spaces on the 10 May 2023.

Update on Policies and Strategies

- 13. Management of the Parks and Countryside Estate continues to be shaped by Durham County Council's Vision, Environmental Statement and relevant policies within the Local Plan that aim to protect and enhance our biological resource, as well as be cognisant of the level of protection afforded to designated sites.

14. The Tree Management Policy was updated in March 2024 and continues to shape the corporate approach to managing trees for beauty, character, heritage, and biodiversity.
15. The Council continues to react proactively to new legislative requirements pertaining to the environment; most recently the need for most developments within the catchment of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast Special Protection Area to be nutrient neutral. The Council is collaborating with partners, including Natural England, Northumbrian Water, Environment Agency, and Durham Wildlife Trust to develop mitigation strategies to enable development to proceed without negatively affecting the protected areas.
16. Progress on delivery of the Council's Climate Emergency Response Plan 2 was reported in March 2024. This has been significant with successes including those linked to the protection of the county's natural environment as recognition of its vital role in tackling climate change. Measures undertaken have included tree planting schemes, the conversion of amenity mown grassland into wildflower meadow, peatland restoration projects, continued support for marine habitats, and research into blue carbon benefits. Parks and Countryside and the wider Clean & Green team continues to support a number of these measures, alongside further biodiversity management practices, while continuing to promote the climate change agenda through their range of education and community programmes.

Update on Resources

17. The Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) builds in additional investments from 2022/23 announced as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan. This included additional staffing for the delivery of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Programming staff in the Countryside team, Rangers/Nature Reserve Officers, as well as support for woodland creation.
18. Since the recruitment of a full-time Volunteer Programme Coordinator, part-time Community Programme Coordinator and full-time Assistant Education Officer, the Parks and Countryside Programming Team have engaged with 7898 school pupils, delivered over 300 school workshops, and engaged with 3000 families in the form of school holiday events and activities. Over 270 volunteers have been managed and delivered targeted community programmes to 1,700 people across the county.
19. These new engagement figures show a significant level of growth across the three programming areas, providing benefits to biodiversity that include:
 - a. A large, growing volunteer workforce facilitating the management of our high-quality green spaces - nature reserves, country parks,

railway paths and picnic areas are all supported by this workforce who undertake a wide range of practical activities around the county. Volunteers are supporting Ranger staff in their delivery of site management plans and associated biodiversity objectives.

- b. Other community group involvement in practical activities and learning including harder to reach groups (e.g., those with additional needs, young people, those affected by poverty and deprivation) supporting the management of the countryside estate as well as helping to build resilient communities, tackle negative behaviours and develop local connections to countryside sites and green spaces.
 - c. Providing educational programmes that remind people of the value of high-quality green spaces, biodiversity, and eco-systems, increasing their understanding of the role the environment plays in the future of our planet and effects on climate change. Instilling a life-long learning approach, providing opportunities for people of all ages to better connect with these themes and their local environment.
 - d. Encouraging the people of County Durham to become more involved in the protection of biodiversity in their own neighbourhoods, and support ecological recording. Undertaking effective interpretation, marketing and communication that increases public understanding of biodiversity, vital habitats, and the county's unique environmental features, many of which support rare, nationally significant, and protected species. Utilising all available resources to develop these communications – including digital opportunities and new technologies.
20. The Parks and Countryside team have been delivering for biodiversity through active land management of the Countryside Estate for over 50 years. Biodiversity is considered in all activities undertaken. The recruitment of two new Ranger/Nature Reserve Officer posts has provided an increase in resource that has had a profound effect on the Service's ability to deliver its site management objectives.
21. These new roles have increased the Ranger team from five to seven, allowing additional resource to deliver biodiversity through active management of the 1300 ha Countryside Estate which comprises of designations - SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest - 6), LNR (Local Nature Reserve - 22), LWS (Local Wildlife Site - 20), Destination Parks (2) and recreational assets such as the railway path network.
22. Resources have been redirected onto Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) with baseline condition assessments being undertaken this year at: Broompark, Hayberries, Pity Me Carrs, Low Newton Junction, Tanfield Lea, Causey Arch, Witton Dene, Lanchester Valley RP – hurbuck

triangle, Hardwick Park, Cocken Wood, Ferryhill Carrs. Some of these sites have existing condition reports that are ten years old, so a comparison of condition is timely.

23. Resources have also been allocated to effective biodiversity management practices in high priority areas, such as the SSSI's and through ongoing Countryside Stewardship scheme, agreed works through Natural England are being completed successfully.
24. Rangers have seen higher levels of involvement in community engagement, providing expert advice and support to programming staff and their delivery of volunteer services, targeted community projects and outdoor learning across the wider countryside estate (nature reserves, picnic areas and the railway path network) to provide a sustainable approach to land management, and an ongoing commitment to DCC's Climate and Ecological Emergency declarations.
25. The additional staffing resource provided since 22/23 has allowed increased capacity to secure external funding for the benefit of biodiversity. Commercial acumen is present and supporting biodiversity management using external opportunities realistically adding value to existing capital investment projects, revenue growth opportunities, and other Environmental Service level priorities, including those highlighted by the CERP, EEAP reports.
26. The Council is already making use of new funding streams and opportunities to diversify biodiversity on selected areas of amenity green space, for instance successful rounds on Urban tree Challenge Fund, as well as a recently awarded Parks Levelling up Grant, and Towns and Villages Walking and Cycling Capital investment programme.
27. External funding streams can deliver action held within the EEAP, most notably developer contributions for biodiversity net gain (BNG) to deliver habitat enhancement on Council land. These developer contributions can restore habitats back to good condition, over a thirty-year period. However, there is still much work to be done before the authority has a coherent approach to this, with an agreed management protocol for land out with current Service responsibilities, and management implications that will impact revenue budgets beyond the actual BNG delivery objectives.
28. Currently, Parks and Countryside Team are responsible for delivering environmental benefits through Higher level Stewardship Schemes on five sites across the County. These schemes effectively pay the Authority for carrying an agreed specification of actions to improve habitat quality. All these schemes are nearing or finished the ten-year contract, and have annual, rolling contracts used until the future of environmental schemes are clearer. The forthcoming Environmental

Land Management (ELMs) scheme, which will replace current Agri-environment schemes, should provide a mechanism to fund positive land management for biodiversity on parts of the Councils rural landholdings. We may look to increase the amount of land managed this way. However, we are still to see what the new schemes entail and until then will role our existing schemes on an annual basis.

Clean and Green - Biodiversity and Sustainability Delivery

29. Durham County Council continues to provide major, active land management through both the Parks and Countryside, and Clean and Green and services involved with the woodland estate (CPAL and Landscape).
30. The Services continue to follow individual site management plans which have been established for all Parks and Countryside sites and are valid for 5 years. Each plan has an annual work programme that identifies what tasks are carried out in any year. Reactive work continues to be needed regularly - due to adverse weather, anti-social behaviour, or customer comment or queries.
31. Contractors continue to be used to deliver larger targeted actions on sites, particularly those that have Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) support payments from DEFRA agreements. Parks and Countryside are awaiting confirmation of Defra review of the HLS regime and what this means for financial support of high value site management moving forward.
32. There continues to be a lack of baseline ecological data due to the limited management resources provided to Parks and Countryside over the last 20 years, alongside larger scale restoration requirements beyond current financial provisions. The 22/23 investments provided as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan have provided further opportunities to engage the wider public in facilitating the collection of data, but there is still little potential for full ecological assessments and reports across the entire estate (apart from LWS) – which would increase the potential to deliver significant biodiversity benefits through the restoration and creation of wildlife habitats. This will continue to be a piecemeal informal process.
33. Engaging the public in the collection of data has been achieved through citizen science projects included as part of targeted sessions with community groups, and public Bioblitz events. These activities have facilitated species identification and recording by the public with assistance from local recording experts. Community based data collection has also been achieved through the promotion of self-led opportunities to get involved in surveying, which has been communicated in print and through digital/social media platforms.

34. The wider Clean and Green Team are responsible for providing a variety of services including grounds maintenance of parks, open spaces, school grounds, cemeteries, and closed churchyards. Currently, the Clean and Green team are responsible for around 21 million square metres of green space across the county.
35. The Clean and Green Service has implemented a suite of biodiversity enhancements on open spaces ranging from habitat creation to changes in cutting regimes. The largest of the habitat creation projects has been the seeding of a hectare of open space in Durham to create a species rich grassland supporting a range of wildlife. Other interventions include overseeding grasslands with wildflowers at the Durham Coast and reducing cutting regimes on amenity grasslands across the county to allow wildflowers to set seed and spread. The service has also planted scrub woodland and installs and maintains all the Urban Tree Challenge Fund (UTCF) sites, with around eight hundred trees planted per year under this scheme.
36. Clean and Green Service currently maintains forty-five areas of meadow and wildflowers. This number includes 8 new sites (2023/2024). A recent report by Clean & Green, 'Rewilding, July 2022' highlighted all the potential sites that were consulted on. Out of the 28 sites proposed, only 8 were agreed with local councillors. No new sites are currently proposed as we are currently completing a strategy for future sites, which will tie into the LNRS and give good strategic direction to new biodiversity area creation and deliver an outcome-based approach.
37. Other notable achievements include the continual reduction in the use of fungicides, pesticides, and herbicides and this will continue. The reduction in peat use is now well advanced with trials on peat free composts for the annual bedding and Morrison Busty nursery on-going. There have been some initial positive results with peat free trials, but further trials are needed to identify viable alternatives. The nursery now offers peat free products for sale to the public and is beginning to phase out peated products.
38. Clean and Green are continuing to roll out biodiversity interventions across all sites and are developing a strategic document to guide the rate that sites for wildlife in conjunction with input from the Ecology Team. This process has taken longer than expected due to the change in the policy landscape – it is important the strategy dovetails with the new LNRS when it is completed, and the new BNG legislation that has come into law early 2024.
39. The Ecology and Clean and Green Teams both acknowledge that there are constraints to the delivery of biodiversity interventions, including staff time to develop the site plans, undertaking consultations, and delivering the required interventions within the appropriate seasonal

windows. These constraints and potential solutions will be part of the strategic planning process. Each site also should have site appropriate interventions, rather than a one size fits all approach. However, all interventions and new management options should be achievable and deliverable within DCC's capabilities. The new strategy will aim to give a 'menu' of management and intervention types that could be employed at sites around the county.

Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change

40. The Parks and Countryside Programming Team have delivered biodiversity/climate change themed learning to large numbers of children and young people through school education, events, and activities. A captivating programme for schools engaged with over 7800 school pupils during 2023, with an additional 3000 families taking part in informal learning opportunities, events, and activities.
41. Links to the EEAP are interlaced throughout the Parks and Countryside outdoor learning programme, incorporating climate change issues in all workshops delivered to KS1, KS2 and KS3. The education provision explores the ecological emergency in detail with groups, delivering activities that focus on themes such as biodiversity, ecology, food, energy, and weather/ landscape changes.
42. A full programme/plan of educational opportunities that will support promotion of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy consultation has been developed by the Parks and Countryside Education Team. This plan includes opportunities for over 600 children and young people to engage in activities to support their learning on protecting and conserving our environment for the benefit of biodiversity. This plan will be delivered throughout 2024-25.
43. An extensive level of other public engagement work has taken place across the Parks and Countryside Estate in the form of targeted community programmes. These have included a comprehensive volunteer led guided walks programme, alongside workshops that have supported 2000 harder to reach individuals into our parks, nature reserves, railway paths and picnic areas. These harder to reach groups have included children, young people, older people, those with additional needs (physical, emotional, behavioural), and those affected by poverty and deprivation.
44. The delivered community projects have directly supported the Climate Emergency and Ecological Emergency response plans, bringing information on climate change effects and natural solutions to people on a more personal and local level, and directly influencing behaviours for the benefit of biodiversity and conservation.

45. Planned community projects are in place for 2024-25 financial year focusing on sites identified as at higher risk of anti-social behaviour, lack of public buy-in in terms of habitat protection, and low levels of engagement/learning in terms of biodiversity, ecology, and climate change priorities.
46. The Parks and Countryside Team has seen a vast increase in the number of volunteers supporting both practical site management activities and programming objectives. This increase equates to a percentage rise of 179% in the number of volunteers supporting the Service since the appointment of a new Volunteer Co-ordinator in 2022.
47. Volunteer hours have risen by over 90% since 2022 with 14,200 volunteer hours being undertaken throughout 2023. These include vast amounts of practical work undertaken in support of site management staff and their biodiversity management priorities. They also include hours devoted by volunteers to the community guided walks programme which helps promote the historical, cultural, and environmental features and value of the county's countryside to the public, and sense of ownership for local green spaces. This huge number of volunteer hours equates to the equivalent of £160,000 of in-kind assistance. This figure is based on the metric used by DCC AAP projects when calculating volunteer match funding.
48. New opportunities for corporate groups to become involved in Parks and Countryside volunteering have been developed, with 143 corporate volunteers from a range of local businesses and organisations attending sessions to support staff with practical management tasks over the last 18 months. Development of the corporate offer is planned for the new financial year, with additional opportunities being established, and further marketing and promotion being planned to maximise information reach.
49. The Parks and Countryside Team have developed higher levels of involvement in national initiatives to support the protection of nature reserves and other countryside sites and green spaces around the county. A full programme of community litter picks undertaken as part of Keep Britain Tidy's Big Spring Clean Campaign has strengthened links between communities and the green spaces in their own neighbourhoods. Activities to support other environmental and cultural schemes such as World Wetlands Day, The Big Garden Bird Watch, Love Parks Week, National Insect Week, World Environment Day, and Heritage Open Days have also been developed.
50. Interpretation improvements have been made to several sites across the Parks and Countryside Estate, including complete signage overhauls at Causey Arch and Picnic Area, as well as Pow Hill Country Park. These have provided new levels of information relating to site specific biodiversity and conservation value, historical and cultural

significance, as well as how countryside sites play a role in nature-based solutions and the effects of climate change. This new interpretation is a significant educational tool for promoting public awareness and ownership objectives highlighted by the CERP, EERP, and LNRS.

51. The digital impact of the Parks and Countryside Team has seen a substantial rise through more effective use of social media platforms to promote key topics linked to the ecological and climate emergencies. Public posts aim to raise awareness of the work of the Team across the estate and its importance to biodiversity and the ecological emergency. General posts are also planned regularly, often linked into national initiatives to educate followers about County Durham's wildlife and habitats, as well as ways they can get involved in helping their local green spaces.

Clean and Green Open Space Management for Biodiversity

52. Ongoing intensive maintenance is the enemy of biodiversity; restricting plant growth through mowing and strimming limits or prevents habitat creation for insects, small mammals, birds, and other animals. In addition, native weed species are more than twice as beneficial to pollinators and insects as ornamental and wildflowers (Balfour & Ratnieks 2022, appendix 4). By using different methods, Clean and Green are seeking to change the management of currently mown grassed areas to make them havens for wildlife. However, a good balance between providing useful public amenity and aesthetics and creating wildlife habitats is possible.
53. In partnership with DCC's Ecology team, a strategy for habitat and meadow creation across the county is in development, which will follow national mapping from agencies such as Bug life, who have created a Bee-lines map, showing the commonly used pollinator corridors across the country. By cultivating meadow and wild sites along the bee lines, their use by pollinators can increase. In turn, and in doing so, other animals, insects, and plant species as well. This approach is intended to dovetail with the LNRS and BNG strategy.
54. The approach for each site will be determined by the nature of the site itself, some will significantly benefit from wildflower meadows, some will be grassland meadows, many will be encouraged self-seed to produce native grass meadows. When developing plans for each site, a wide variety of factors will be considered when dividing how to manage. Including native species in the area, soil and land type, cost, and benefit to the local community. In addition, Clean and green will be looking to create mini habitat potential wherever possible, allowing native species to grow unhindered in areas such as under hedges, (linked to herbicide use, covered later in this report.)

Use of Herbicides in public spaces

55. Use of Glyphosate is still widespread across the county and is the current primary herbicide. Whilst studies show it is safe for long term use, (please see the amenity forum document in the appendix 2) there is a growing concern around its use. You can see the results of Cardiff's trials of alternative herbicides in appendix 3. Through informal in-house trials we have determined that there are currently no viable cost effective alternatives to glyphosate for herbicide in the public realm. As such, the approach to reducing dependency on glyphosate, should be to simply reduce the use of herbicide.
56. The best solution to the issue is to cease herbicide use completely and allow self-seeding plants to thrive, however, as with open space maintenance, a balance must be made between public amenity and biodiversity.
57. As such, after consultation with local members, trials were undertaken in green spaces in the following wards:
- Witton le Wear
 - Howden le Wear
 - Bishop Middleham
 - Sedgefield
 - Brandon
 - Sherburn
58. These areas will still receive herbicide treatment on the street scape, however, in green spaces we will no longer spray around trees, under hedges or around street furniture.
59. We received no complaints about weeds in any of the areas indicated above over the trial period.
60. However, we noticed that due to the length of time chemical was used in the areas and possibly due to soil compaction and other factors, very little grew in the spaces that were traditionally sprayed.
61. It is proposed that the trials should continue for an additional year to observe if any vegetation can establish in these spaces, and what impact that has on community perception.

Conclusions

- 62 Durham County Council continues to be proactive in its reaction to new legislation and national policy development and collaborates with partners to protect natural assets. The Council has committed to a Climate Change Response Plan and most recently an Ecological Emergency Action Plan which ensures through decision-making, that

net gains in biodiversity through the adoption of environmentally beneficial management regimes.

63 The work promotes an awareness of biodiversity and the impact of climate change on nature within County Durham.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

If temporary staff are to retained, budget growth will be required.

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

The decline in biodiversity detailed in previous reports.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Loss of temporary staff will adversely affect delivery.

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable

Appendix 2: Amenity Forum, Glyphosate report

Attached under separate cover.

Appendix 3: Cardiff Hard Surface Weed Control Report

Attached under separate cover.

Appendix 4: Balfour, Nicholas J., and Francis L. W. Ratnieks. “The Disproportionate Value of “Weeds” to Pollinators and Biodiversity.”

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Attached under a separate cover