

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

24 February 2023



Management of DCC Land for Biodiversity Overview

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

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide information to the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, assisting members to understand the role the Parks and Countryside Team play, together with colleagues within Clean and Green, to deliver management of Nature Reserves and Green Spaces across Durham County Council (DCC) owned land.
- 2 This report sits beside the Ecological and Climate Emergency reports and outputs, contributing broadly to most objectives.

Executive summary

- 3 The Council has been delivering and supporting improvements to biodiversity, habitats, and landscapes, not just for the benefit of wildlife, but for people and communities. We are all enriched by contact with the natural world, and is felt across the full range of health, wellbeing, and economic factors.
- 4 Our 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.
- 5 This report focuses on what the Parks and Countryside Team delivers in terms of Biodiversity gain, and wider Clean & Green adaption of current

open space management to benefit wider biodiversity goals, developed through the recent Ecological Emergency Action Plan, (EEAP).

- 6 The EEAP will also feed into a County-wide Local Nature Recovery Plan, examining what more can be achieved working with partners on a countywide scale, whilst sharing best practice across the regional land management sector.
- 7 Parks and Countryside Team have delivered biodiversity through active estate management for over fifty years, covering a countryside estate of 1300 hectares and all sites have contributed to biodiversity.
- 8 The estate comprises of:
 - 6 Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI)
 - 22 Nature Reserves
 - 20 Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)
 - 2 Destination Parks
- 9 In addition to these sites there are also 120 structures, some of which are listed, 38 car parks and two catering outlets. Most of the sites are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- 10 The Clean and Green Service maintain 37 areas of meadow and wildflowers with a further 28 sites identified for biodiversity interventions. The Clean and Green Service continue to roll out biodiversity interventions and work closely with colleagues in the Ecology Team in relation to developing site plans.
- 11 The Teams are involved in providing information to schools and communities regarding biodiversity and climate change themes. Specialist community projects and volunteering opportunities develop a greater understanding of the value of biodiversity and of the countryside sites within their own neighbourhoods and promote awareness of a wider nature recovery strategy and the impact of climate change.

Recommendation

- 12 That Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
 - a) Receive the report and presentation and comment accordingly.
 - b) Arrangements are made for the committee to visit DCC parks and open spaces within the 2022/2023 work programme.

Background

- 13 At its meeting on 22 July 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.
- 14 In accordance with that decision arrangements have been made for the Principal Parks and Countryside Ranger to attend the meeting on 24 February and provide members with an overview of the management of DCC owned land for biodiversity.

Summary of Policies and Strategies

- 15 A raft of policies supporting the wider protection and enhancement of biodiversity across the county is within the County Durham Local Plan. Specific policies include:
 - Policy 41. Trees, Woodlands, and Hedges.
 - Policy 42. Biodiversity and Geodiversity.
 - Policy 43. Internationally Designated Sites.
 - Policy 44. Protected Species & Nationally and Locally Protected Sites.
- 16 All relevant policies within the local plan aim to protect and enhance our biological resource and be cognisant of the level of protection afforded to designated sites. Amongst other relevant policies include a Tree Management Policy which sets out a corporate approach towards tree management, inspections, maintenance, and replanting.
- 17 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.
- 18 The Council's Environmental Statement also references the Ecological Emergency and states that the Council will seek to protect and enhance natural capital across its estate, highways, woodlands, and green and blue spaces. It ensures through decision-making, that net gains in biodiversity through the adoption of environmentally beneficial management regimes.

- 19 The County Durham Vision 2035 sets out what we would want the county to look like in 15 years' time. This vision promotes three ambitions which are: More and Better Jobs, People Live Long and Independent Lives and Connected Communities. Biodiversity vision is referenced under the More and Better jobs ambition it states, "we will protect and enhance our core heritage and natural assets." Other references to biodiversity and the natural environment come under People Live Long and Independent Lives where the vision says that "we will maximise the quality of our local environment."
- 20 The Climate Emergency Response Plan recognises that the county's natural environment has a vital role to play in tackling climate change and includes key measures to work towards including the protection and restoration our coastal and marine habitats, protection our existing semi-natural habitats and the utilisation and targeting of nature-based solutions.

Resources

- 21 The Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP) focuses on how through a joined up corporate approach to the challenge, and where appropriate (for instance in land management) by doing some things differently, more can be achieved. It builds in the additional investments from 22/23 announced as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan for instance staffing for Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Rangers, and Programming staff in the Countryside team, as well as support for woodland creation.
- 22 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.
- 23 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.
- 24 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.

Clean and Green - Biodiversity and Sustainability Delivery

- 25 The services with a major, active land management role within the Council are Parks and Countryside, Clean and Green and services involved with the woodland estate (CPAL and Landscape).
- 26 Parks and Countryside team have been delivering for biodiversity through active land management of the Countryside Estate for over 50 years. Although variable in approach and extent due to levels of resource, there is a clear ethos of considering biodiversity in all activities.
- 27 The countryside estate is approximately 1300 ha, comprising a suite of sites from the highest local, regional, and international wildlife designations to recreational assets such as the railway path network. The estate covers land across the county, with a bias towards central and eastern areas.
- 28 All sites contribute to the biodiversity of County Durham and receive intervention depending on site characteristics and available resource.
- 29 The Estate comprises of SSSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest - 6), LNR (Local Nature Reserve - 22), LWS (Local Wildlife Site - 20), Destination Parks (2). These sites are open 24 hours/day, 7 days a week, etc. The land area can be compared to 10,000 swimming pools or 1800 football pitches. The fencing and drainage liabilities associated with railway path network is equivalent to driving to Leeds and back. Also responsible for over 120 structures (viaducts, bridges, culverts), some listed, and thirty-eight car parks. We also directly manage and oversee two catering outlets.
- 30 We estimate four million visits annually, and many are return customers with some returning multiple times per day, mostly for dog walking.
- 31 County split into North and South for management purposes. Site management staff seven rangers and 2 Senior Rangers. The Destination Parks have a compliment of Assistant Rangers, as these cover all aspects of park and facility management, over a 7day rota.
- 32 All sites have a current management plan which are valid for 5 years. Each plan has an annual work programme that identifies what tasks are carried out in any year. There is also a significant amount of reactive work that occurs – either due to adverse weather, anti-social behaviour, or customer comment or queries.

- 33 Much of the work on the countryside estate is carried out by the professional members of the Parks and Countryside service. Further to this, volunteers play a huge role in assisting with the delivery of management aims and have contributed work valued at many millions of pounds.
- 34 Pre-covid volunteers numbered 104, providing 15,000 hours, equivalent to £169,000. Programme delivery occurs every week and one Sat per month. Also, other regular ad-hoc opportunities around County, whether corporate volunteering, or
- 35 Although previous service reduction resulted in changing priorities for site-based staff, more use of contractors to deliver larger targeted actions on sites, particularly those that have Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) support payments from DEFRA agreements. Costs have minimal budgetary impact on core Council budgets. 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.
- 36 Recent investments in Parks and Countryside staff, do allow for a re-focus of activity to address DCC's Climate and Ecological Emergency declarations.
- 37 The new roles will allow the team to direct resources onto Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) currently held within the countryside estate. These sites will require survey effort to establish a baseline condition assessment to be monitored regularly to check progress against agreed targets. Where appropriate, the sites team will engage and support community and education outreach staff to provide a sustainable approach to land management.
- 38 The Parks and Countryside Service have identified barriers to biodiversity delivery including a lack of baseline ecological data and condition assessments, a decline in available management resources over the last 20 years and larger scale restoration requirements beyond current provisions. Given the specialist knowledge held within the service and the size of the estate, there is potential to deliver significant biodiversity benefits through the restoration and creation of wildlife habitats should resources be allocated.
- 39 A novel approach to identifying baseline species within a site has been to use citizen science through community Bioblitz events, where species identification and recording by participants with assistance of local recording experts. This technique will extend to other sites across the estate.
- 40 Both the Ecology and Parks and Countryside team are currently working on a system to tap into Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements through the planning system; a financial mechanism to

deliver certain habitat enhancement works within the estate which is likely to lever in some additional necessary resource.

- 41 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.
- 42 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.
- 43 Clean and Green Service currently maintains thirty-seven areas of meadow and wildflowers with a further twenty-eight sites identified for potential future biodiversity interventions. These sites will be subject to consultation and detailed design work to ensure any interventions are appropriate to the location. A recent report by Clean & Green, 'Rewilding, July 2022' highlights these potential sites and is an example of how Clean and Green are currently approaching biodiversity interventions on open spaces.
- 44 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. The service has committed to be peat-free by 2025.
- 45 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.
- 46 Once the above approach and potential sites agreed in principle, the Ecology Service intend to assess potential for funding the interventions via BNG.
- 47 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.

Engagement, Education, and Behaviour Change

- 48 A core function of the Parks and Countryside service is to promote the Council's countryside estate, ensuring work is adding value to communities by having high quality outdoor space nearby. The Parks and Countryside programming team are delivering biodiversity/climate change themes through school education events and activities, as well as through a programme of guided walks. The service also supports a range of initiative and projects through partnership working across the county.
- 49 Education Team, provide a captivating programme for schools to engage with. Pre covid numbers 6,500 children, and almost 25,000 people engaged through events and activities. We are steadily building back and with the extra staffing support hopefully will exceed our pre-covid figures
- 50 Members have recently agreed to resources and provisions for three new outreach staff - Parks and Countryside Volunteer, Community and Education Engagement Officers. These staff are focussing on site-based nature recovery activities with local communities across the countryside estate and supporting delivery of the EEAP.
- 51 Specialist community projects and volunteering opportunities will connect the ecological emergency to communities on a more personal level. The projects aim to develop a greater sense of ownership by giving people the opportunity to see the direct local impact of negative environmental behaviours and increase their understanding of the biodiversity value of countryside sites in their own neighbourhoods, whilst promoting awareness of wider nature recovery strategies and climate change impact. The new investment will also support continuing environmental education programmes.
- 52 The promotion of the eco-emergency is throughout the outdoor learning programme, incorporating climate change issues during all workshops including KS1/2/3, encouraging positive and sustainable changes to reduce our individual impact. New workshops that explore the eco-emergency in our locality including activities focused on biodiversity, ecology, food, energy, and weather/ landscape changes. Older students will be engaged through the John Muir Award which encourages a responsibility for our environment and promotes individual well-being.

Clean and Green Open Space Management for Biodiversity

- 53 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. 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.

- 54 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 Buglife, 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.
- 55 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).
- 56 Highway verges represent an extremely important habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna. Around 50% of the UK's Wildflowers are in Highway Verges, providing havens for pollinators and other species. To safeguard and encourage biodiversity along our highway verges, we are changing our routine maintenance.
- 57 It is important to clarify that junction sightlines will still be maintained to ensure the safety of motorists and pedestrians.
- 58 From 2023 all verge cutting (except sightlines) will be reduced to one cut per year, to a maximum depth of 15cm and outside of flowering seasons. This approach will ensure that growth from vigorous species will still be managed, and by timing the cut correctly, (no lower than 15cm), many flowering species will be available to pollinators through their flowering season.

Use of Herbicides in public spaces

- 59 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. As such it is only right that DCC conduct trials of alternatives in the public realm to determine their effectiveness. This year we will be trialing Pelargonic acid and Acetic acid (both naturally occurring compounds) to determine their efficacy We have also been monitoring other local authorities' investigations into the use of alternative herbicides. You can see the results of Cardiff's

trials of alternative herbicides in appendix 3. These trials, however, only represent one half of the C&G approach to herbicide use with regards to biodiversity.

60 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.

61 As such, after consultation with local members, we are also trailing the cessation of herbicide use in green spaces in the following wards:

- Witton le Wear
- Howden le Wear
- Bishop Middleham
- Sedgefield
- Brandon
- Sherburn

62 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.

63 In effect, this will create ‘mini-meadows.’ Pockets of wild grasses and flowers that will be a haven for insects, pollinators, and small mammals. This is particularly important around Hedgerows, which are home to a wide variety of native flora and fauna, with 69% of the species listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) having habitats associated with hedgerows (hedgelink.org).

Conclusions

59 Durham County Council continues to be proactive in its reaction to new legislation and national policy development and works 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.

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

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Not applicable

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

Not applicable

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.