

25 March 2024

Durham City Green Corridor

Partnership Project with the National Trust

Report of Alan Patrickson, Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change

Electoral division(s) affected:

Elvet and Gilesgate, Belmont, Neville's Cross, Sherburn, Framwellgate and Newton Hall

Purpose of the report

- 1 To provide members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with background information in advance of a presentation on the Durham City Green Corridor (DCGC). This is a partnership project between Durham County Council and the National Trust (NT), with a jointly funded project manager, Laura McIntyre-Brown, hosted by the NT.
- 2 The presentation will focus on the aims and measures that the project is hoping to achieve through improvements for people and nature in a green and blue corridor along the River Wear, located to the northeast of Durham City, and using Crook Hall Gardens as a hub site.
- 3 A copy of the presentation is attached as Appendix 3.

Executive summary

- 4 The DCGC is an NT and Council partnership project covering the northeastern fringe of Durham City, along approximately a 6.5-mile corridor of the River Wear. The aim is to work with people and nature to enhance the natural environment whilst providing a valuable accessible resource for both visitors and the local community. The NT's property, Crook Hall Gardens, is intended to serve as a hub or gateway between the urban and natural settings.
- 5 The DCGC project also aligns directly with the Council's strategic priorities and plans, providing opportunities for promoting health and wellbeing and active travel, whilst contributing to climate and ecological

emergency declarations, strengthening the visitor economy and helping to unlock more parts of Durham City for the creative economy.

Recommendations

- 6 Members of Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are recommended to:
 - a) Note and comment upon the information provided within the report and presentation.

Background

- 7 Urban green spaces play an important part in everyday life. They provide people with spaces to relax, connect with nature, exercise, and play. They create a sense of place and, if well managed, contribute to overall quality of life. Green spaces can help us fight climate change, help clean the air and provide habitats for wildlife. Studies have shown that green and blue environments can be associated with a reduction in stress, improved mood and a decrease in anxiety.
- 8 In March 2022, the NT acquired Crook Hall Gardens, a Grade I listed medieval manor house, positioned approximately one mile from Durham City centre and the railway station. The NT had an ambition to create a significant nature and access-rich corridor to the northeast of the city; providing the potential to connect urban communities with the countryside on the city's fringes along the River Wear.
- 9 The NT embarked on an initial three-year project to explore and develop the potential of the green space in this area of Durham City, supporting the NT's *Urban Places* strategic ambition of addressing unequal access to nature, beauty, and history, with a focus on towns and cities.
- 10 Having some landowning interests within the green corridor, and recognising the potential that this area has for people and nature, the Council has agreed to partner with the NT to investigate how the project can improve access to green space for communities whilst making improvements to nature.
- 11 The project area lies within close proximity to the Durham Castle and Cathedral World Heritage Site, Aykley Heads Nature Reserve, the DLI, Wharton Park and Low Newton Junction Local Nature Reserve. It is expansive, following a 6.5 mile stretch of the River Wear stretching from Durham City in the south, to Finchale Priory in the north. It connects urban areas of the city with expanses of greenbelt with great scenic qualities and a rich cultural heritage. A map of the envisioned area can be found in Appendix 2.

- 12 The project provides an opportunity to support a number of Council strategic aims: promoting health, wellbeing and active travel, contributing to the climate and ecological emergency plans and strengthening the visitor economy. At its core, the project partnership leverages skills, experiences, relationships, resources, and funding from both the Council and the NT, which in turn strongly aligns with the countywide *Better Together* principles.
- 13 The DCGC also aligns directly with existing Council plans and strategies, notably the 2020 Spatial Vision which highlights how *“At the heart of communities will be accessible green infrastructure, not only improving the quality of place but people’s quality of life and reducing health inequalities...green infrastructure will be protected, and where necessary, enhanced, promoted and expanded in partnership with key agencies and delivery partners.”*
- 14 In November 2022, a jointly funded Project Manager (PM) was appointed to the DCGC to help develop connected and accessible green space at scale. Although hosted by the NT through its urban team, the PM also has an operational base in the Council’s Landscape Delivery Team. The partnership is supported by a Collaboration Agreement between both parties.
- 15 To this end, a contribution of £25,000 per year has been committed to support their role by the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change from core budget. Over their three-year term, the PM is expected to deliver:
 - (a) An agreed and signed long-term partnership agreement between the Council and the NT, with associated funding package.
 - (b) An agreed and public plan for access enhancements and nature recovery.
 - (c) Good practice and support towards the objectives of the programme through partners’ and stakeholders land management processes.

Progress in 2023

- 16 The past year has reaffirmed the vast potential for the project to work with, and deliver for, people and nature. Throughout its first full year in 2023, the project focused on building strong foundations for an effective partnership between the Council and the NT. Visioning work for the green corridor commenced in February 2023, with a partnership workshop held to explore a collective vision and identify initial project ideas. The resulting vision takes a place-based approach, illustrating how Durham is a place where nature, culture and heritage are inextricably linked. The principle

is to make it easier for people to reconnect with nature, with the city and with each other.

17 Core highlights from the year include:

- Developed a project vision, established a joint governance structure with an officer-based partnership board to guide project direction and ways of working. While the Board has effectively guided the project, many council leads have championed the work internally, making significant contributions to the project.
- Commenced our stakeholder engagement work. At the core of the project is a commitment to engage with communities so that partner and community interests can be taken account of, to enable project leads to make informed decisions and increase the likelihood of getting the right outcomes for more people. We have connected with at least 30 external organisations during this process and surveyed local communities.
- Formed an extensive evidence base to ensure the project secured a better understanding of the area. Captured through audits, surveys, desktop research and mapping, there is now a comprehensive baseline for nature and people in the DCGC.
- The DCGC project provides an opportunity for the feasibility of projects to be tested in alignment with the roll out of the project vision and delivery plans. Task and finish teams have been convened to accelerate the delivery of projects and spotlighting the area as a place to test different approaches for existing council work programmes. Additional funding has been secured including £50,000 for access improvements from NT restricted funds and £10,000 for a Blossom programme from the People's Postcode Lottery.

Forward look to 2024

18 The project continues to develop at pace, drawing on support and input from the Council, NT and other stakeholders. Focusing on the long-term financial sustainability of the project does not preclude delivery on the ground.

19 In the coming year the project aims to deliver against the following key priority areas:

- **Health and wellbeing:** The project will continue to develop and enhance the walking and cycling offer in the green corridor, supported by a strategic review of sport and leisure and the continued development of engagement with Public Health.

- **Accessibility and experience:** Around 65,000 people live within 5km of the DCGC. Community engagement has underlined the desire for greater connectivity and clarity of routes as well as more access to nature. 2024 will see the launch of a programme of access improvements in the green corridor. We will launch, in May, a Festival of Blossom aiming to improve people's connection to nature and wellbeing in the city and the green corridor and will continue to deliver our community engagement plan.
- **Enhancing nature:** We will be focusing on working in partnership to bring nature enhancement opportunities to fruition, including the development of funding strategies for these nature-based projects and engaging with private landowners about the DCGC.
- **Capacity building and insight sharing:** There will be continued evidence gathering and work developing the volunteering offer across the green corridor. All the above will be informed by a phased delivery plan which is to be finalised over the first part of the year.

Conclusion

- 20 The Council has ambitious plans for the county, rooted in strategic partnerships as a new way of working, and driving improvements for nature and people. The Durham City Green Corridor is a project that can help deliver these ambitions in partnership, with both organisations and communities, following a place-based approach that can deliver wide benefit for those who visit, live and work in Durham City.
- 21 The team will continue to focus on building plans for the long-term financial sustainability of the project ensuring we engage and deliver for the community, work in ways to protect and enhance nature and landscape and celebrate and care for the diversity of heritage in Durham City.

Background papers

- Supporting PowerPoint presentation.

Authors

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change has delegated authority to enter an agreement for a project contribution.

Finance

A contribution from NCC base budget is allocated to support the role of the PM to the amount of £25,000 per annum for 3 years, a total of £75,000.

Consultation

The project is engaging with the Council's consultation team to build a community engagement plan for the partnership.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None.

Climate Change

The project improves natural capital and promotes active travel to complement objectives of the Council's Climate Emergency Response Plan.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

Staffing support towards PM management and governance responsibilities is being met from existing staffing resource across the council.

Accommodation

None.

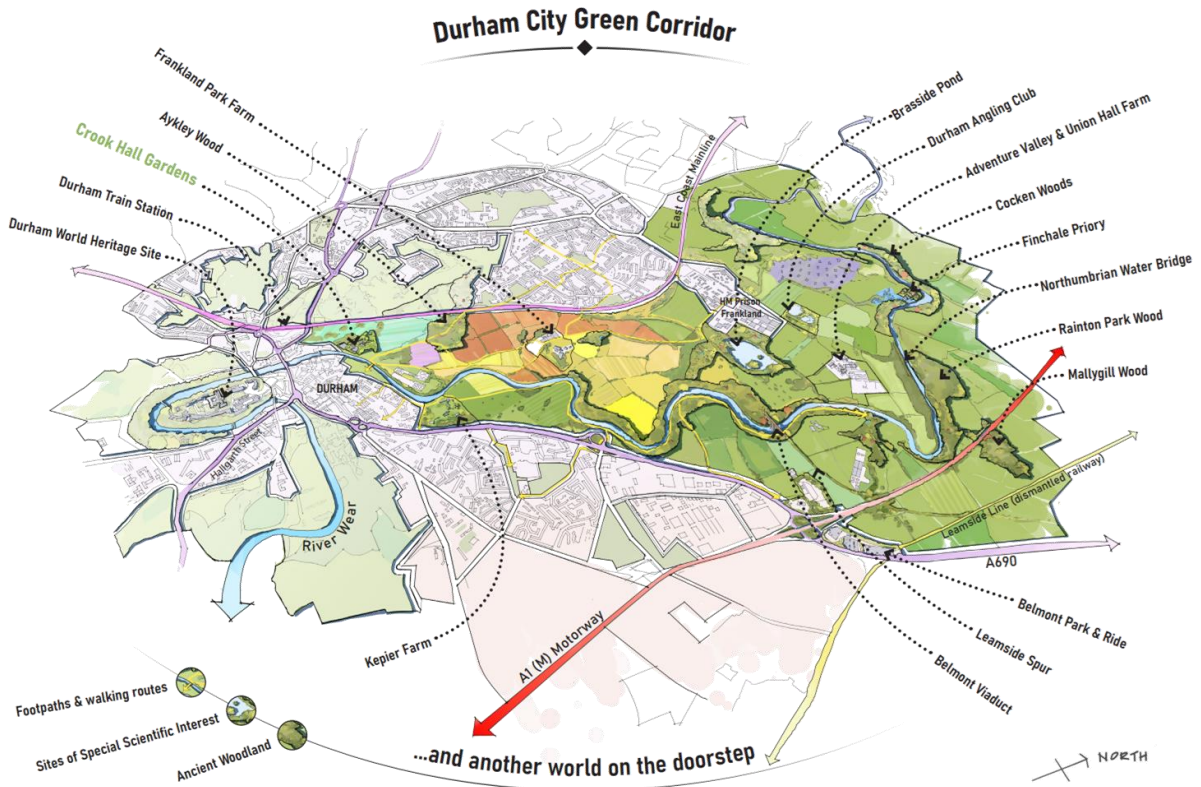
Risk

Reputational and delivery risk are managed in the partnership project governance framework.

Procurement

None.

Appendix 2: Durham City Green Corridor map



Appendix 3: Durham City Green Corridor Project PowerPoint Presentation

See separate PowerPoint document.