

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

24 March 2025



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 the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the Durham City Green Corridor (DCGC), a partnership between Durham County Council and the National Trust. This report provides additional progress information since the Committee last heard from the project on 25 March 2024.
- 2 The presentation will reflect on the focus areas for 2024 and what has been developed to date, as well as providing a forward look for the project beyond 2025.
- 3 A copy of the presentation is attached as Appendix 2.

Executive summary

- 4 The project has achieved significant progress towards its priorities of capacity building and insight sharing, health and wellbeing, accessibility and experience, and enhancing nature. Key highlights include the delivery of access improvements across the corridor, physical activity trials, Durham City in Blossom 2024 and the development of nature enhancement plans. In 2024 the project prioritised capacity building through partnership, collaboration with neighbouring organisations and aligning with, and informing when possible, existing strategic plans.

- 5 As the project enters its final year of the initial concept phase, highlights will include completion of access improvement across the green corridor area, delivery of North East in Blossom 2025, and building on the stakeholder outreach work completed in 2024. Looking beyond 2025, the Council and the National Trust are currently exploring options for continued support which includes leveraging in funding and resources from other key sources.

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, including on progress to date and future plans.

Background

- 7 On 25 March 2024, Sarah Glynn (Strategic Manager for Culture, Durham County Council) and Laura McIntyre-Brown (Durham City Green Corridor Project Manager, National Trust) provided members of the Committee with background information on the Durham City Green Corridor (DCGC), a partnership project between Durham County Council (the Council) and the National Trust.
- 8 To recap, in 2022, the Council and the National Trust embarked on an initial three-year project to explore and develop the potential of the green space in the north-east urban fringe of Durham City. The ambition was to create a significant nature and access-rich corridor that provided the potential to connect urban communities with the countryside on the city's fringes, running along the River Wear.
- 9 This work forms part of the National Trust's ambition to create 20 green corridors by 2030, connecting nature-rich outdoor spaces to urban centres. It also supports a number of Council strategic aims around promoting health, wellbeing and active travel, contributing to the climate and ecological emergency plans and strengthening the visitor economy and place-based regeneration.
- 10 In early 2025, the National Trust launched its new strategy to 2035, confirming commitment in supporting people and nature to thrive. The strategy highlights the National Trust's ambitious goals working in partnerships in urban areas and connecting with urban communities particularly around restoring nature on National Trust land and beyond and ending unequal access to nature, history, and beauty.
- 11 Work in the first phase of the project (2022 to 2025) is focused on activation and enhancement of the existing green/blue space and related assets. Below, we set out some of the areas we were aiming to

deliver against in 2024 and have provided an update on progress below.

Progress in 2024

- 12 The DCGC project has made significant progress across each of the priority areas in 2024. Highlights have included:
- 13 **Capacity building and insight sharing:** Working with nature and communities is a core part of the project approach, and in 2024 we launched our stakeholder engagement. Throughout summer and autumn, the team met with over 70 different groups, businesses, charities and associations exploring the shared outcomes of the project and gathering insights into areas of crossover. Out of this emerged 24 changemakers who agreed to work towards these collective outcomes under the banners of '*Nature & biodiversity*', '*Connection to Cultural Heritage*' and '*People and their connection to nature*'.
- 14 **Health and wellbeing:** Following some early trial activities in 2023, we completed a physical activity review of the green corridor in 2024 and ran a series of physical activity pilots throughout the summer and autumn, with great success. These included yoga sessions, paddleboarding and Dragon Boat racing along the River Wear. We worked with two activity partners to deliver pilots for three community groups, with a total of over 180 people engaged with the programme. A representative of a participating community group commented "It was a truly brilliant activity and provided a unique and wonderful opportunity for participants to engage in something new, fostering a sense of community, belonging, and joy among individuals from various backgrounds."
- 15 **Accessibility and experience:** A standout delivery for 2024 was *Durham City in Blossom*. Having been awarded £10k in funding from the Peoples' Postcode Lottery we worked with over 25 partners to deliver 35+ different types of activities across the city and the green corridor. The work centred around the theme of enhancing wellbeing via an immersive response to blossom, creating a programme of activities that captured the sensory delight of blossom and nature year-round. The programme included activities such as nature printing workshops, blossom bathing and a blossom exhibition at the Oriental Museum as well as the distribution of thousands of maps identifying opportunities for people to engage with blossom on their doorstep. It allowed us to reach new audiences, create additional opportunities for volunteering, develop activities for children and young people and engage people in nature and the green corridor. We found this work helped people's wellbeing. Data collected from the programme evaluation found that 100% of blossom bathing attendees reported their happiness and connection to nature had improved as a result of attending the session.

- 16 **Enhancing nature:** We have worked closely with the Council's Ecology Team and National Trust's Countryside Team, along with Wear Rivers Trust, to understand what nature improvements could be delivered within the corridor, to not only increase biodiversity, but also begin to mitigate the impact of climate change. Using this insight, alongside a hydrogeology baseline report, we are developing a bid to secure funding to deliver these enhancements. In addition, improvements have been made to several of the corridor's main gateways, including clearing litter from the riverbank and invasive species clearance.

Forward look to 2025

- 17 As the project enters its final year of the initial three-year concept phase, we are focused on supporting our stakeholder groups to help shape the future of the project, delivery of in-year activities (including access works and more blossom programming) and developing our approach for longer-term financial sustainability.
- 18 In the coming year, highlights include:
- a. **Completion of access improvements across the green corridor area.** These improvements have been funded jointly by the National Trust and the Council, creating a fund of just under £100,000 to deliver the works. Working with the Council's Public Rights of Way team we will complete delivery of access improvements in five key areas across the corridor. These interventions include path surface improvements, replacement steps and bridges, installation of kissing gates and new, accurate way markers. This work will help more people to enjoy the corridor with clearer and better signposted routes, and feedback to date has been positive.
 - b. **Delivery of *North East in Blossom 2025*.** Following the success of the blossom programme in Durham last year, we were able to leverage a greater level of funding from the People's Postcode Lottery and the National Trust (£60k) to explore and deliver a blossom programme across more urban places in the North East. Durham and the green corridor will remain a key part of this programme; in working closely with partners such as Durham University and The Story, we hope to inspire children and young people through delivering a series of creative workshops, mindful blossom bathing sessions, blossom themed walks, nature talks and tree planting across Durham City.
 - c. **Building on the stakeholder outreach work completed in 2024,** we will now be supporting the changemakers as together we develop plans to meet the project's outcomes. We will be funding an independent facilitator to help guide the groups through this

work. We hope to host workshops with neighbourhood groups to help shape the plans in line with our strengths-based approach.

- 19 The Durham City Green Corridor project was set up to be both phased and scalable. The first three years (November 2022 to November 2025) are focused on concept development and short-term delivery opportunities e.g. trial programming, access improvements. Medium to longer-term delivery was designed to be informed by our extensive stakeholder engagement activity, as detailed above.
- 20 Whilst benefits to Durham City have already been delivered through this initial three-year phase, we recognise there is greater value to be unlocked whether that is for people and place, nature and climate, or heritage and culture through continued partnership working. This is very much in keeping with the Council's corporate priorities of responding to the climate and ecological emergencies as well as achieving a community focussed approach towards place shaping, through its County Durham Together approach. There are also notable contributions arising from this work in terms of improving community health and wellbeing and promoting a sustainable approach in developing the county's visitor economy. The outcomes are intended to be a useful learning tool for replication elsewhere.
- 21 For the period post-2025, the Council and the National Trust are currently exploring options for continued support which includes leveraging in funding and resources from other key sources. This includes the strategic alignment of the Durham City Green Corridor with other existing activities for the Council, including area-based regeneration such as the strategic place plan for Durham City, as well as sources such as the North East Combined Authority. The Council has also identified a budget contribution to enable support for delivery of the programme for a further year so that continuation can be secured whilst a long-term resourcing model can be assembled.
- 22 We are also looking externally. We are currently awaiting outcomes from a research funding bid focused on a co-produced model of arts and humanities place-making across 3 green corridors in the North East. We expect additional funding bids to arise from our stakeholder engagement work, biodiversity improvements review of the green corridor and we would be exploring funds to connect communities cut off from the corridor by the surrounding infrastructure.

Conclusion

- 23 The Durham City Green Corridor set out to explore what a partnership between the National Trust and the Council could unlock in terms of access to nature-rich green space in Durham City, working with nature and people to help build these plans. Insights gathered to date have already highlighted the value held in these green and blue assets on the

doorstep of the city, and pilot activities have showcased how additional benefit could be delivered in the longer term.

- 24 We will continue to work to create a sustainable legacy of the green corridor, working with the large number of stakeholders now contributing to this work who are positioned to take this work forward over future years. We hope to secure funding that enables this project to continue beyond November 2025 and are currently exploring various internal and external funding options in order to do so.

Background Papers

- Weblink to the [National Trust's New Strategy](#)

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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 match fund the role of the PM to the amount of £25,000 per annum for 3 years, a total of £75,000, ending this financial year. With a total of £75,000 match funding secured from the National Trust. Additional contributions by the Public Rights of Way team, from the Rights of Way Improvement Plan budget, have been made amounting to £50,000. Additional match funding of £50,000 has been secured from the National Trust. A continuation contribution has been agreed in principle by the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, details of which are being finalised.

Consultation

The project has engaged with the Council's consultation team to build a community engagement plan for the partnership work. This has been expanded into further outreach in 2024/2025 guided by best practice in effective participation.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

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

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Staffing support towards PM management, governance responsibilities and improvements in access is being met from existing staffing resource across the Council.

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

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

Procurement

Not applicable