

Environment & Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee
SITE VISIT – Community Woodlands
14th July 2014

Present

Councillors B Graham (Chairman) and D Hall (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors J Clare, J Clark, K Hopper and I Jewell

Co-opted Members – Mr T Bolton, Mrs P Spurrell.

1. Harvey Wood, Cassop - Greeted by Gary Haley – Woodland Trust Site Manager.

Members were advised that Harvey wood was a broadleaved woodland planted in 2013 that covered 32 hectares of land reclaimed from East Hetton or Kelloe Colliery and contained approximately 62,550 trees on the site. It sits on the northern slopes of the Kelloe Beck Valley and is an important addition to the Magnesian Limestone grassland, fen and older woodland. Local school children helped to plant the trees which are all native species to the area such as oak, hazel, birch and rowan. These trees are an excellent way to help local wildlife, providing sources of food and places of shelter. Native woodland is one of the richest habitats for wildlife supporting everything from plants, lichens and fungi to insects, butterflies, small mammals and birds. Wildlife most likely to be found here includes hare, field vole, deer and speckled butterfly.

The woodland was also part of the Limestone LinX walking and cycling network which provided 11 miles of routes connecting the communities of Bowburn, Coxhoe, Old Quarrington, Quarrington Hill, Kelloe and Cassop. The new wood was part of a unique group created in honour of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in partnership with the Woodland's Trust. Within the North East 8 sites were secured, 2 within this area; Ferryhill and Spennymoor as part of the project creating 134 hectares of new woodland within County Durham.

There area was subject to regular maintenance, with a full survey of the area being undertaken every 3 years to identify any dead trees, which would subsequently be removed and replaced. This also included the management of weeds.

Details were also provided regarding commercial activity and it was noted that the woodland area could also provide significant economic benefits through the fire market and forestry of trees used for timber products.

In addition to the above there was a full programme of restructuring woodland, which included the strategic thinning of tress to open the structure of the site and also to allow the good tress to grow to their full potential.

Harvey wood was not at this time established enough to be thinned however DCC had contacted all local councillors regarding the thinning of 64 woodland sites across the county.

Reference was made to Burnopfield and the positive management of the site and income generated from the sale of saw logs and wood fuel. Currently the DCC estate as a whole was being assessed with a view to thinning those sites which were not managed by the Countryside rangers (Neighbourhoods).

Further discussion took place regarding ancient woodland classification.

Councillor Clark raised a query with regard to Ash Die Back and whether the disease was now under control. In response it was reported that the disease had not travelled much over last few years however realistically they could not take the chance at this time to plant any Ash in the County's woodlands.

2. Kingswood, Little Wood, Local Nature Reserve – Greeted by Darryl Cox Head Ranger.

Kingswood used to be arable land but 39 hectares of broadleaved woodland were planted as part of the 5 villages (5 Villages commenced in 1997) with the project at Kingswood 'Waste to Wildlife' project taking place in 2003. The site is planted with broadleaf trees: hazel, rowan, blackthorn, dog rose, ash, oak and birch. These trees are important as there is very little woodland cover in the east of County Durham and will provide a vital source of food, shelter and breeding sites for insects, birds and mammals.

It was reported that some of the Hazel trees which would be seen on site were around 12 years old and that within 50/60 years a good canopy would be formed. In addition, the group were informed that when the area was first planted, there were hundreds of skylarks as young woodland areas were ideal for breeding. As the trees continue to mature, the number of skylarks would eventually decrease while the numbers of other types of wildlife would increase such as tawny owls, kestrels and sparrow hawks. Currently visitors could regularly enjoy the sights of jay, woodpecker, crow and wood pigeons.

A major issue reported to Members was that following the receipt of temporary funding via the Heritage Lottery Fund for many of the projects to undertake the capital work necessary there was an issue in finding funding to maintain these sites. A volunteer scheme was promoted via Durham's Countryside Service providing an opportunity to make new friends, learn new skills, get fit and have fun with volunteers helping with education sessions, checking sites and footpaths, planting trees, building fences, picking litter and much more. In addition volunteering was also open

to community groups and corporate groups with work undertaken on the various sites with groups including young supported learners and alcohol and drug abuse groups and Northumbrian Water Limited.

3. Crowtrees Local Nature Reserve – Greeted by Darryl Cox, Head Ranger.

Crowtrees Local Nature Reserve was a site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within close proximity to Kingswood, Little Wood and Coxhoe Quarry Wood Local Nature Reserves forming a huge wildlife corridor. The site was also a Local Wildlife Site and UK Woodland Assurance Scheme certified.

During the winter highland cattle graze the wetland area and fields around it keeping the tall grasses and scrub down. If this vegetation was not controlled, the dominant grasses would take over and crowd out the slower growing wildflowers. The cattle also churn up the soil creating an area where wildflowers and grasses can set seed and colonise.

Crowtrees is greatly influenced by the geology with coal mining and quarrying shaping the landscape. The large nature reserve is special because of the diversity of habitats found there; flower rich grassland, scrub, ponds and wetland make it a real hot-spot for wildlife. On the edge of the Magnesian Limestone plateaux, the grassland found here has a rich and unique mix of wildflowers and grasses.

Natural England operate a contract with Durham County Council to look after the site with Community 'buy in' – 6 local volunteers for Kingswood and Crowtrees together with rangers visit the site once per week. It was further reported that community conservation days were held at a number of sites 2 to 3 times a year. In addition, Durham County Council also produced the Guided Walks Programme April – September 2014 which detailed guided walks planned throughout County Durham.

Various initiatives are run on sites, these vary depending on the site but include the adoption of a seat where individuals are encouraged to adopt a seat which needs repair very popular at Hardwick Park and the coastal walks. In addition, have also established adopt a tree initiative at Hardwick Park.

Work is also taking place with the Sustainability Team within DCC looking at whether wood from harvested woodlands currently underway could be used in biomass boilers to heat our schools, 20 boilers within schools have been identified as being capable of adaptation to use wood chippings. However discussions are taking place in relation to capacity at schools to dry wood chippings on site, access for delivery etc.

In relation to harvesting the woodland it was reported that there had been a procurement exercise carried out however only 2 companies came forward. As earlier reported there was some extraction taking place at Burnopfield however there were issues in relation to selling on the wood, due to a lack of business knowledge

by the contractor. From a good yield it was expected that harvested wood would fetch in the region of £11.00 per tonne.

Further work was to be undertaken in order to stimulate the sectors and to seek assistance from the LEP.

Mr T Bolton asked whether the sponsorship of woodlands (trees/gates) had been considered on a similar basis to advertising on roundabouts within the County. It was noted that some of the woodlands were poorly maintained and would need significant investment in order for them to attract potential sponsors.

Councillor Graham asked whether AAPs had been used to publicise woodland areas within the County and to identify various activities planned. It was noted that Corporate Communications were currently preparing an article for the September addition of the Durham County News highlighting community woodlands within the county and giving a flavour of the various events planned. In addition, those AAPs with an objective of woodlands have been targeted with Crook and Derwent Valley providing funding for local woodland based projects.

It was further suggested that the service could utilise the AAP magazine to highlight/promote what is happening on a seasonal basis in relation to community woodlands within their areas and also seek to engage new volunteers or anyone wishing to provide financial assistance.

4. Coxhoe Quarry Local Nature Reserve.

Coxhoe woodland, the most mature woodland of the three visited was mainly dominated by ash, beech and sycamore with some beech trees between 200 and 300 years old which supported an enormous number of insects and birds.

At the centre of the site Members viewed the old quarry which hosted excellent examples of Magnesian Limestone grasslands. Of special note was the presence of Blue Moor Grass combined with other wildflowers, which is an increasingly rare sight in the UK. It was reported that the majority of Magnesian Limestone Grassland has been destroyed in Britain over the past century however two thirds of what remain, can be found in east Durham and Tyne and Wear resulting in grasslands of national importance.

The magnesium escarpment provided a breeding ground for a number of rare species including a very rare variety of orchid which covered the site.

It was reported that in order to maintain the grassland, Rangers were employed to manage the land to ensure that the site did not become overgrown. In addition, the site unfortunately suffered from anti-social behaviour and staff were tasked with regularly monitoring the site and clearing up any rubbish which had been dumped at the site.

The service also relied upon the help of volunteers and many gave up their time to help manage the site on a regular basis.