

Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny
SITE VISIT – HERITAGE COAST

Present

Councillor B Graham (Chair)

Councillors J Clare, J Clark, J Gray, G Holland, I Jewell, O Milburn and;

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

Officers

T Gorman, L Finnigan, N Benson and L Gladders

1 Blackhall Rocks

Members were welcomed to the first site and introduced to Daryl Cox, Head Ranger.

Niall Benson, Principal Heritage Coast Officer advised that in terms of landscape and natural area this site was totally unique and could not be found anywhere else in the world. The site had recently benefitted from Heritage Lottery Funding which had allowed for car park improvements, picnic tables, signs and interpretation boards to be installed. It was noted that ongoing investment was important for the site in order to see the project through to completion in 10 years' time.

It was noted that the service had recently been through a restructure and three posts had been deleted. Mr Cox reported that this was ultimately impacting upon the service's ability to manage sites.

Regarding Blackhall Rocks it was reported that the shore line had been significantly cleaned up and the water quality had improved drastically with such. It was noted that the demographics of the coastline were also changing so much with many small infill developments taking place at many sites, which was a testament to the way in which the coastline had improved and was now an attractive environment.

Councillor Holland queried what the length of the coastline was. In response it was reported that that the coastline was 9.8 miles from Blackhall Rocks to Seaham with an overall length of Heritage Coast reaching 18 miles.

Discussion took place regarding the accessibility and infrastructure and whether there were and direct bus routes to and from Blackhall Rocks to Seaham. It was noted that there was no direct service however in summer months it had been known for a mini bus to be provided to shuttle visitors between the two sites.

Further discussion took place regarding the works which had been undertaken to ensure that the sites was a real asset for the village including the relocation of footpaths closer inland to encourage the growth of natural grasslands.

The grasslands prefer non-rich soils and therefore grazing cattle were used over a large area to help manage growth.

Volunteers were key to the effective management of the sites and 5 regular volunteers attended the site on a weekly basis. It was queried whether any work had been undertaken with schools and the wider community in order to educate and encourage others to volunteer. At this present time it was reported that the service did not have the resources available to do this.

Further discussion took place regarding the interpretation boards with panoramic images which would be installed. Councillor Clark further made reference to work which had been undertaken at Horden with the local school to install interpretation and educational boards.

2 Crimdon

Members were welcomed to the site and introduced to Trevor Stephenson, the Little Tern Warden for the area. It was reported that this site was hugely important in terms of conservation with a habitat of Terns, a species which was in decline in Europe and with such an amber list species.

Members were shocked to see the levels of litter at the site and it was noted that this was often the scene on a Monday morning following a busy weekend. Clean and Green managed the top of the site and the dunes were managed by the Countryside Rangers. There was no management by Durham County Council of the beach area.

It was also noted that there were currently no public toilet facilities at the site due to thieves stealing the electrical cables.

The site welcomed approximately 30,000 visitors per year and the site had seen some significant changes since 2000 from the removal of sand dunes and the natural regeneration of grasslands. In addition a fully serviced caravan park had been developed.

With regard to the little tern population, it was reported that there was a bird colony on the beach where the birds laid their eggs and fledged their young. 92 young terns were safely fledged in the last year. It was reported however that the colony was at risk of decline due to predators and disturbances on the beach and it was so important to ensure the safety of new born chicks. In order to do this it was important that the landscape was carefully managed and any marram grass was removed to prevent hawks and other predators. Volunteers were key to this process however it was noted that a chemical treatment plan would be beneficial in order to properly control the growth of marram.

The Warden advised that every effort must be made to help protect these birds from extinction and further work must be undertaken with partners including Natural England to prevent the loss of habitat from this area.

3 Beach Banks - Horden

Members viewed the work which had been undertaken with Schools at the Horden Denes site which commenced in 2010/11. Interpretation panels and artwork had been installed at the site and were shortly due to be refreshed in advance of the official opening on 30 September.

The visit then went on to view the works which were being undertaken on the site of Horden Colliery to build the new station taking in the expansive views of the coast.

4 Seaham Marina

Members were welcomed to the Marina and were given a short presentation by an officer from the Seaham Community Interest Company (CIC) which showed the before and after images of the development of the site. It was advised that the land was owned in its entirety by the Dock Company however the premises and facilities on site were in shared ownership (50%) by Durham County Council held on a 35 year lease.

At this stage in the development the team were busy trying to get tenants in to fill the empty units with 56 out of the 77 already being let. The flagship building 'The Waterside' comprises of 12 commercial units, a marina using floating pontoons to accommodate up to 77 leisure craft, reinstatement of the dock gates, improved slipway and public access to the North Dock.

Because of the areas industrial past all of the houses in the area had been built facing inland, however with more new development and the regeneration of the coastline houses were now being built facing out to sea.

The regeneration of the area was part of a 10 year plan which was currently 1.5 years in and currently on target.

Further discussion took place regarding housing development and the County Durham Plan and future regeneration of the area including retail units and office spaces to let.

In conclusion it was noted that due to the extensive regeneration and conservation of the marina and surrounding area people were now regularly visiting and spending the day at the site.