

## Cabinet

15 October 2014

### Declaration of Local Nature Reserve (LNR) for Easington Colliery



Key Decision R&ED/14/14

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#### Report of Corporate Management Team Ian Thompson, Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development Councillor Neil Foster, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration

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#### Purpose of the Report

- 1 To formally declare DCC owned land at Easington Colliery as a Local Nature Reserve.

#### Background

- 2 The proposed site was home to the former Easington Colliery which closed in 1993 and the area landscaped for wildlife and recreation by the Millennium Commission funded 'Turning the Tide' project in 1999. The site is currently under the management of the Neighbourhood Services Directorate as public open space (see Appendix 2 for site layout).
- 3 Local Nature Reserves (LNR), are places of local wildlife interest declared by Local Authorities to enable people to enjoy and interact with the natural environment. Formally declaring the site as a LNR will ensure long term provision of a locally accessible recreational asset within Easington and allow local groups to facilitate environmental learning and health based events for the community. Declaration and subsequent management as a nature reserve is in accordance with the Council Plan Priority Altogether Greener objective to 'Maximise the value and benefits of Durham's natural environment'.
- 4 The Easington Colliery Regeneration Partnership has requested that the site be declared as a LNR and managed thereafter for biodiversity and recreation and has formed a Nature Reserve Sub-group to liaise with the Council's ecology unit concerning future management and community volunteering. Consultation in the community by the Regeneration Partnership has demonstrated strong support for the Nature Reserve with many local people interested in becoming involved.
- 5 The site has high nature conservation value and contains several UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species (Common Toad, Skylark and Dingle Skipper) and several Durham Biodiversity Action Plan Priority

Habitats (woodland, ponds, fen reed bed, brownfield mosaic and lowland meadow). Formal consultation with Natural England has confirmed the sites' suitability as a Local Nature Reserve and has welcomed the proposed declaration (see Appendix 3).

- 6 Declaring the site as a LNR will allow the Council and Regeneration Partnership to draw attention to the nature conservation interest on the site within the community and help deliver the Council's Corporate Objectives and our legal obligations concerning protecting and enhancing biodiversity. Managing the site as a nature reserve will also make a contribution to regional targets contained within the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan and maximise opportunities to attract investment to further improve public access and nature conservation and be compliant with the dedicated open space provision of the Millennium Commission Grant funding.
- 7 The site is currently open space and although it is in proximity to existing and proposed housing it is not earmarked for housing in the emerging County Durham Plan. There will be no loss of revenue from the current position as a result of declaring the site a Local Nature Reserve.
- 8 Amongst other partners in the community wishing to raise the profile of the site is Healthworks, the NHS service provider in Easington. Healthworks have secured a Community Learning grant to arrange a series of short educational courses and are currently forming a 'Friends Of' group with interested local volunteers. Partnerships like this will raise the profile of both the LNR and DCC through publicity and further contribute to the drive to address health deprivation in the area through a programme of task based habitat management volunteering and species monitoring events and guided walks. Appendix 4 shows various opportunities for the local community to become involved in managing the site. The habitat management works have been discussed with the Regeneration Partnership Nature Reserve Sub-group and an outline of works prepared with a programme of events for the local community which will be progressed once formal LNR Declaration is complete.

### **Recommendations and reasons**

- 9 To delegate authority to the Corporate Director of Regeneration and Economic Development in consultation with the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Economic Development to take the necessary steps to establish land at the former Easington Colliery as a Local Nature Reserve.

### **Background papers**

Appendix 2: Plan of proposed Easington Local Nature Reserve

Appendix 3: Natural England letter of support

Appendix 4: Schematic and Opportunities for community volunteering

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Finance –**

There is unlikely to be a financial implication following declaration as a LNR. The site is managed a public open space currently and it is envisaged that the current grass maintenance regime and level of public accessibility will continue. The current mown recreational area is valued locally and is to be retained therefore revenue savings are unlikely as no changes to the mowing regime are required.

The LNR will be publicised in the region therefore an increase in visitors is expected potentially generating economic benefits for retailers and catering establishments in Easington Colliery.

### **Staffing –**

Formal declaration is likely to create short term additional workload for the Ecology unit through the compilation of a management plan for the site and advising the Regeneration Partnership Nature Reserve Sub Group. This can be managed internally through work programming and is not likely to impact on current staffing levels and once the management plan is complete involvement is likely to be reduced considerably.

### **Risk –**

Not proceeding with formal designation to LNR status could result in regionally important habitats and species at risk in the future from inappropriate development and lack of appropriate habitat management. The site would not have a high profile in the community therefore local volunteering interest is unlikely to be sustained in the long term.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty –**

No implications

### **Accommodation –**

No implications

### **Crime and Disorder –**

No implications

### **Human Rights –**

No implications

### **Consultation –**

Local members Councillor Surtees and Councillor Boyes have both been consulted and are supportive of this proposal.

Natural England have been formally consulted on this proposal under the provisions of Section 19 and 21 of The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as amended) and their support is recorded in Appendix 2).

**Procurement –**

No implications

**Disability Issues –**

No implications. The topography of the site has resulted in limited provision for disability access at present. Formal declaration will raise the profile of the site and allow the exploration of opportunities to further enhance access for disabled visitors.

**Legal Implications –**

Formal declaration as a Local Nature Reserve will commit the Council to manage the site for its nature conservation interest and protect it from inappropriate use or development. As the site is currently managed as public open space this is not considered to be a significant change from the current situation.

The site is in freehold ownership of Durham County Council however the work completed under the Turning the Tide Project was subject to Millennium Commission grant funding and part of the site is under a Deed of Dedication for continued use as public open space. Declaration as a LNR is likely to be wholly in line with the terms of the grant.