

Protection of Green Assets**Countryside Sites**

1. We have several different schemes and plans across our sites working with voluntary groups and individuals:

Thornley Woods, Derwent Valley and Derwent Country Park

2. We are in the process of completing the Thornley Woods visitor centre asset transfer to the current occupier as a café and visitor hub. This will secure the centre as a site for public information about the wider site and as a resource for the Volunteer Countryside Rangers to promote the volunteer scheme, Gateshead's countryside sites and give general information about Thornley Woods, Derwent Valley and the Derwent Country Park. The facility will also help with the management of 6 bird hides (sale of keys to bird watchers) and also continue to provide public toilet facilities for park users. The asset transfer removes the cost to the council for maintaining the facility and also generates a small income for the council.
3. The Volunteer Countryside Rangers (with support from the Council's Countryside Ranger) continue to provide practical conservation task days to carry out much needed park maintenance and improvements.
4. We are refreshing the sculpture trail working with the local chainsaw sculptor, carrying out further maintenance work on Crowley's dam and improving outdoor picnic space at the Woodland Centre.
5. We are currently updating and rewriting the site management plan with a view to applying for the Green Flag Award in 2023 and the volunteers and interested parties will play a large and important part in this process.

Forest Schools

6. We have forest school providers at Norwood, Riverside Sculpture Park, Chopwell, Chase Park and Saltwell park using our sites to provide opportunities for young people aged 2 – 16, adults, NEET, special needs and refugees. As part of the agreement the providers carry out small scale habitat management works to help maintain the sites.

Conservation Grazing

7. We use rare and native breeds of cattle, sheep and ponies across several sites to help manage the grasslands and wider habitats at specific times through the year. The cattle and sheep are provided by local farmers at no cost but in receipt of free grazing and the ponies are from the Moorland Mousie Trust that rescues Exmoor ponies, again they receive free grazing. This enables us to reduce the mechanical cutting and reduce costs.

Durham Wildlife Trust (DWT)

8. We have been working successfully in partnership with Durham Wildlife Trust for several years now. On behalf of the Council, they manage the following sites:
 - Addison Village and Hedgefield Quarry
 - Barlow Burn

- Chopwell East Fields
 - Chopwell Meadows
 - Cross Lane Meadows
 - Lamesley Pastures
 - Ousbrough Wood
 - Shibdon Pond and Meadow
 - The Folly (Greenside)
 - Victoria Garesfield
 - Westfield Pasture
9. Working in partnership with the Wildlife Trust has several benefits relating to the management of our sites. In the main it removes the pressure from our limited resources for the day-to-day management. It still allows public access and has led to an improvement in sites where DWT volunteers have carried out conservation works and training. Council officers meet regularly with the Trust to discuss ongoing management issues.

The Woodland Trust

10. The Woodland Trust own/manage a portfolio of woodlands in Gateshead including two sites it leases from the Council. The most recent of these is the recently established Summerhill Wood near Path Head. Plans are currently being developed for the creation of a new 26ha Woodland Trust community woodland at Dunston Hill.

Land of Oak and Iron Trust

11. The Land of Oak & Iron Trust is an independent charitable organisation, working closely with the Land of Oak & Iron partnership which the Council is a member of. The trust provides and maintains a visitor centre and café in the Derwent Countryside Park which is valued and frequented by park visitors as well as providing other events and initiatives.

Environmental Volunteers

12. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Street Scene supported around 35 environmental voluntary groups with around 400 active members. Groups were wide ranging and varied from parks' friends of groups, gardening and litter picking groups to special interest groups. Groups were coordinated by the Technical & Development Officer in Street Scene along with support through the council's volunteering offer. Volunteers received assistance from operational teams by providing advice, loan of equipment, sacks, gloves and waste collection.
13. The outbreak of Covid-19 meant that almost all volunteering initiatives had to cease and this situation continued through most of the year and into 2021. With the relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions, volunteering support has gradually resumed, and the Technical & Development Officer has worked closely with groups to identify and implement volunteering tasks in a Covid secure manner. Some examples include; solo litter picking on the Derwent Walk and Watergate Forest Park, socially distant Balsam pulling along the Derwent, socially distant tree planting at Dunston park and wild flower sowing at several sites.
14. We have a number of volunteer groups across the borough who carry out practical habitat management, run events, lead walks and provide an information service.
15. We have volunteer groups at the following countryside locations,

- Clara Vale
- Highfield
- Pelaw Quarry Pond
- Stargate Ponds
- Watergate and Washingwell Woods

16. These groups carry out small scale practical site management works regularly throughout the year.

17. We also have the Volunteer Countryside Rangers. This group meeting weekly for a Ranger led task day where they carry out priority habitat management tasks. Over the years they have built up a skill set that allows them to carry out quite complex tasks with professionalism. They also meet independently to work in small groups on simpler tasks.

Other Voluntary Groups

18. As well as groups involved on our countryside sites, the Technical and Development officer supports a number of groups who volunteer in parks, neighbourhoods and green open spaces. These are:

- Love Your Avenues
- Low Fell Planters
- Friends of Chopwell park
- Friends of Felling Park
- Wardley Womblers
- Brighton Ryton
- Friends of Ferndene Park
- Crawcrook & Greenside Our Villages
- Friends of Chase Park
- LARKs – a Ryton based litter picking group
- Pelaw Bowling Club
- Watergate Womblers
- Chase Park Womblers
- Bainsley Lane Coppicers
- Avondale Terrace
- Calderwood Park
- Dodds Dene
- Dunston Staithes
- Dunston Park
- Far Pasture
- Friends of Harlow Green
- Friends of Calderwood Park
- Oliver Henderson Park
- Planting Up Whickham

19. All these groups receive support in the form of supplies, tools & equipment. Officer time and guidance, event support, help with risk assessments and funding bids.

Access Improvements

20. We have carried out access improvements to sites across the Borough to improve vehicle and pedestrian access and both countryside sites and rights of ways. Works have included:

- Resurfacing Stirling Lane carpark.
- New boundary fencing, boom gates and accessible kissing gates at Whitehills.
- New steps, accessible ramp, fencing and resurfacing works at Watergate Forest Park.
- New steps at Shibdon Dene.
- Boundary maintenance treatments on a number of sites and public rights of way.

21. Where these improvements are on countryside sites the Volunteer Countryside Ranger have helped to carry out improvements as part of the practical conservation task days.

Tree Planting

22. The More & Better Woods Action Plan sets out the Council's strategic approach to delivering woodland creation and largescale amenity tree planting on Council land, including identifying potential planting sites.

23. The Council has recently secured grant funding to support the appointment of 2 x two-year fixed term posts from April 2023 – April 2025 to coordinate/accelerate the delivery of woodland creation and amenity/urban tree planting on Council land.

24. Despite limited capacity, last winter the Council planted:

- Approx. 6ha of new woodland (c.15,000 whips) at Whitehills Nature Park. These trees were planted by the local community, school groups and uniformed organisations. The local community continue to be engaged in the ongoing establishment and aftercare of the site.
- 77 heavy standards with NECF funding across 18 sites in 15 Wards.
- 144 fruit trees to make 10 community orchards.
- Worked in partnership with the Woodland Trust, the Tree Council, Trees for Cities, Durham Wildlife Trust, St Anne's Community Care, Lloyds Bank and Friends Groups to deliver tree and hedge planting.
- Worked with the Lord Lieutenant Office and volunteers to deliver tree planting in celebration of the Queen's Jubilee Green Canopy initiative.

Woodland Management

25. The Council is currently progressing the production of a UK Forestry Standard compliant Woodland Management Plan for its entire c.900ha woodland estate. The process is likely to take 18 – 24 months and once completed will:

- provide a plan of management operations for each woodland
- enable the Council to apply for external grant funding to support the positive management of its woodland for people and wildlife

Funding

26. The Council has previously used/uses a number of different funding streams to help us deliver both projects and general habitat/site management works, although external funding to support the latter is more limited. Funding streams include:

- Trees for Climate – administrated by the North East Community Forest
- Local Authority Treescapes Fund – administrated by the North East Community Forest
- Woodland Creation Accelerator Fund – Defra
- Countryside Stewardship – Natural England
- The Tree Council
- Trees for Cities
- Flood and Costal Erosion Risk Management – The Environment Agency

Partnership Working

27. Partnership working allows us to:

- benefit from the capacity and expertise of others to develop/fund/deliver projects,
- reduce the Council's land management burden and associated costs,
- promote Gateshead's countryside to a wider audience, attracting visitors and investment to the borough.

28. It also establishes Gateshead as a responsible landowner and manager and a forward-thinking authority.

29. As well as Durham Wildlife Trust and the Woodland Trust we work with other organisations to help us manage and develop our sites:

- As part of the Team Valley Flood Alleviation Scheme we are working with the Environment Agency on reducing flood risk and delivering infrastructure and biodiversity improvements within Norwood and Eslington Park.
- In the Derwent Valley we are working with Groundwork to deliver events on the wider site. Gateshead sites are also benefitting from Groundwork's Revitalising Our Estuaries project.
- Tyne Rivers Trust deliver events on our sites.

Allotments

30. The council owns 51 allotment sites including 1168 allotment plots. 31 of these sites are directly managed by an Allotment Association. The association is responsible for the general management of the site including collection of allotment rents, day to day maintenance and queries and disputes. This arrangement reduces the demand on the council to manage the sites and in return the association retains the rental income to help maintain and manage the site.

31. There are also 6 private allotment sites managed by associations across the borough.

Sports Pitches

32. The council has successfully leased or community asset transferred its facilities for 9 bowling green, 16 football, 3 cricket and 1 rugby facilities to sports clubs who now manage and maintain the sites. This has protected the future of the facilities and offered greater opportunity to develop and improve further. The facilities are maintained by volunteers within the sports clubs, often generating funding and income from external sources and increased community involvement and initiatives.

Park Friends of and User Groups

Friends of Saltwell Park

33. We work closely with the Friends of Saltwell Park volunteers to support us with improvement initiatives and events in the park. The group of 650+ members is active in completing a range of tasks including, rose bed planting, community orchard planting and maintenance, general tidy up, horticultural improvements and promotion of the park.

Saltwell Park User Group (SPUG)

34. The group was established and is managed by the council to help coordinate the range of interested groups in Saltwell Park. It includes representatives from Friends of Saltwell Park but also other park users such as the Model Boat Club, the Wednesday Gardening Group, the Buzzing Garden, North Tyneside Bee Keepers, ReCoCo and parkrun. The group is active in carrying out events and improvement projects and maintenance initiatives in the park.

Recovery College Collective (Recoco)

35. Recoco is a charitable organisation offering support and educational services in Saltwell Park for those who have used or use mental health services. The group lease the park's training centre, securing the future of the building, reducing costs to the council whilst providing a worthwhile community service.

Friends of Ferndene Park/ Brighten Ryton

36. The groups are currently finalising a community asset transfer of the bowling green and pavilion within Ferndene Park, Ryton with support from the council. The premises are to be used as a community facility for the provision of bowls and additional activities for park users.

37. The Friends of Ferndene Park group undertake general grounds maintenance within the park including grass cutting, litter picking, flower/shrub maintenance. The group work with the council on any proposed improvements or suggested changes to the management of the park. The council has been working closely with the group and with their help we have recently refurbished the fixed play provision in the park.

Friends of Chase Park

38. The Friends of Chase Park group undertake general grounds maintenance within the park including grass cutting, litter picking, flower/shrub maintenance. The group work with the council on any proposed improvements or suggested changes to the management of the park. The council worked closely with the group and with their help we carried out a £1m Heritage Lottery Fund refurbishment of the park.

Our Villages, Crawcrook & Greenside

39. With support from the council, Our Villages community group commissioned Gradon Architecture to undertake an appraisal of the opportunity and preparation of a number of concept studies to enhance the public amenity of Crawcrook Park. Further discussions will take place with the council and Our Villages to consider the feasibility of the studies and develop a plan to improve the park using funding available for fixed play renewals along with funding obtained by Our Villages.
40. Our Villages have expressed an interest in a community asset transfer of the Crawcrook Park bowling pavilion and bowling green. The appraisal looks at how these areas can be developed to include refreshments and changing and welfare facilities. The council will continue to work with Our Villages in the development of their proposals and any asset transfer.
41. The group also undertake regular environmental improvements and initiatives around the villages.

Gateshead's Local Plan

42. Gateshead's Local Plan includes policies and designations covering a range of Gateshead's green assets including open space, pitches, allotments, Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), for example. Policies in the Local Plan serve to protect such areas and in terms of biodiversity require the provision of net gains from new development; and ensure there is sufficient provision of open space and playing pitches in terms of quality, quantity and accessibility to meet the needs of the population. The deadline for the next review of the Local Plan is 2025 and this will be informed by new evidence including, for example, a Playing Pitch Strategy and a Green Infrastructure Strategy and Delivery Plan. The huge range of groups and individuals who support the council in the protection of its green assets will be able to contribute towards the plans.