

Water Environment Improvements Project Evidence Form

Scope & Purpose

This form is to be used by the external Water Environment Governance Group (WEGG), to review, validate and formally approve the length of bluespaces improved for the Water Environment Improvements ODI. The form will be completed by the Water Environment Team with support from project partners and presented to the WEGG. After formal approval, the km of water environment improved will be recorded against the ODI and projects will be marked as completed on the Water Environment Scorecard and illustrated as delivered in the Bluespaces Mapping Portals.

Project Name

Links with Nature (formerly Link Together)

Project Lead

Company/ Organisation	Named Lead	Position
Durham Wildlife Trust	Anne Gladwin	Links with Nature Project Manager

Bluespaces Improved

Year	Claimed	Originally Proposed	Reason For Any Change
Year 5	9.7 km	6.8 km	Total project area offers 13.6 km of potential improvements. It was assumed 50% (6.8 km) would be impacted through this project. Activity through the project has delivered more than expected, with a total of 9.7 km water environment improved (see Maps section).

Water Environment Assurance

This project has been reviewed internally to ensure it has delivered benefits above and beyond our baseline and regulatory obligations to improve the water environment accessible to customers across at least two out of three aspects. Following our assurance process, the project was approved by both our internal and external groups for review before delivery. This form presents evidence of project completion and the outputs achieved, to request project sign off.

Level	Project Acceptance Date	Project Approval Date	Completed Project Sign Off Date
Project Team	February 2023	N/A	N/A
Water Environment Steering Group (Internal)	March 2023	March 2023	N/A
Water Environment Governance Group (External)	March 2023	March 2023	June 2025

Project Timescales

Candidate Project Approved	Project Initiated	Project Completed
March 2023	September 2023	March 2025

Project Summary and Highlights

Summary

Durham Wildlife Trust and NWG have worked in partnership with Sunderland City Council, North East Community Forest and Wear Rivers Trust to deliver 9.7 km of improvements via the Links with Nature (formerly Link Together) National Heritage Lottery Fund project.

Links with Nature is a two-year project (2024-2026) managing a large (£2m) capital programme to improve habitat quality and conditions for wildlife, helping to restore nature across 13 council-owned green and blue spaces in the area of Sunderland known locally as the Coalfield. The project is also delivering upgraded access with new footpaths, signage and entrance improvements to ensure the green and blue spaces are more attractive and welcoming to visitors. Alongside this work is a programme of community engagement and volunteering in order to reconnect residents with their local greenspaces and encourage greater use and enjoyment. This is being delivered through developing green social prescribing opportunities through volunteering and nature-based activities which can support good health and well-being.

Bluespaces funding has contributed towards revenue costs in the first year of the project, forming part of the essential match-funding that has enabled the wider lottery-funded project to go head. This is an example of where the Bluespaces programme has been able to help deliver significant environmental improvements, bringing huge value for customers, far in excess of what NWG could support alone.

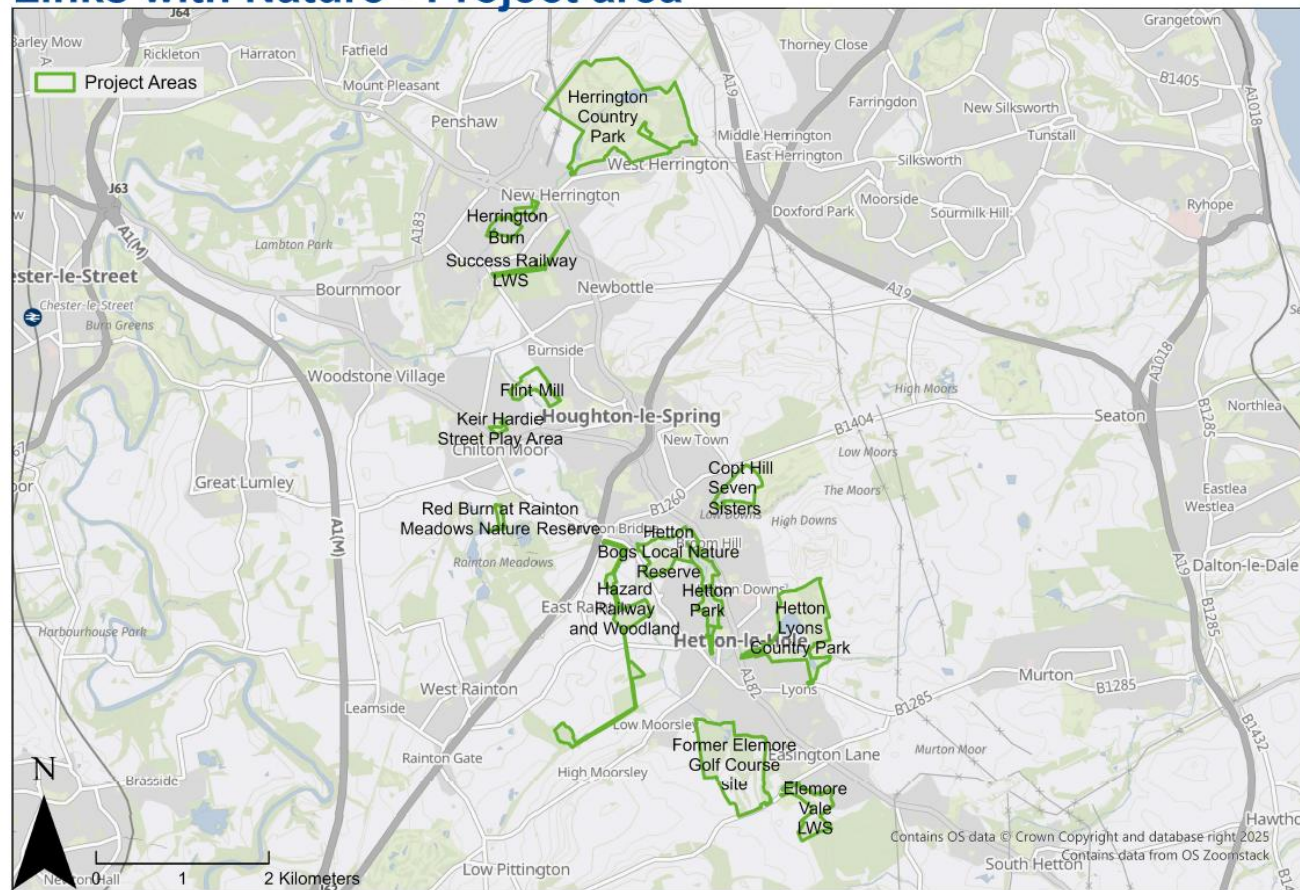
During this year of Bluespaces funding, improvements have been delivered across 9.7km, while future improvements could impact more of the project area's 13.6 km of Bluespaces.

Highlights

- Habitat improvements, including woodland and grassland management, delivered across 11 of the 13 identified green and blue spaces in the Sunderland Coalfield.
- 2300 trees and almost 1 km of hedgerow planted.
- 4.3 km of paths created or upgraded, and 120 m of boardwalk built.
- Engagement with and support given to more than ten community organisations and local hubs
- 85 volunteer tasks completed, totaling 2300 volunteer hours.
- Traineeships have supported professional development and accredited training in land management skills for two conservation trainees.



Links with Nature - Project area



Total length of Bluespaces: 9.4 km

Site	Km Bluespaces Improved
Copt Hill	0.2
Elemore Vale	0.8
Flint Mill	0.6
Elemore Golf Course	0.9
Hazard Railway & Woodland	0.2
Herrington Burn	1.4
Herrington Country Park	1.0
Hetton Bogs	1.2
Hetton Lyons Country Park	1.9
Hetton Park	1.2
Red Burn at Rainton Meadows	0.3
Keir Hardie St Play Area – not mapped separately)	Works not started yet
Success Railway – not mapped separately	No eligible Bluespaces
Total	9.7

Table 1: Km Bluespaces improved at each of the sites within the Links with Nature project area

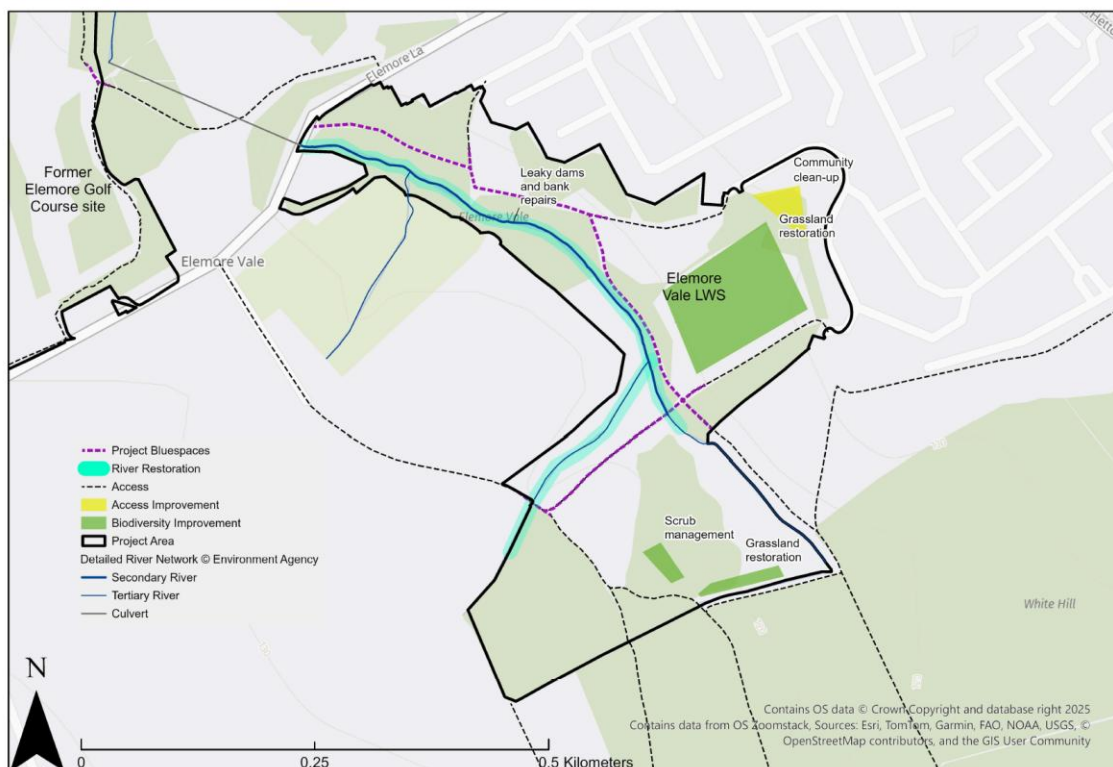
Figure 1: Links with Nature project area, Separate maps for each of the 11 sites where Bluespaces improvements have been delivered are shown on the following pages

Links with Nature - Copt Hill Seven Sisters



Total length of Bluespaces: 0.2 km

Links with Nature - Elemore Vale



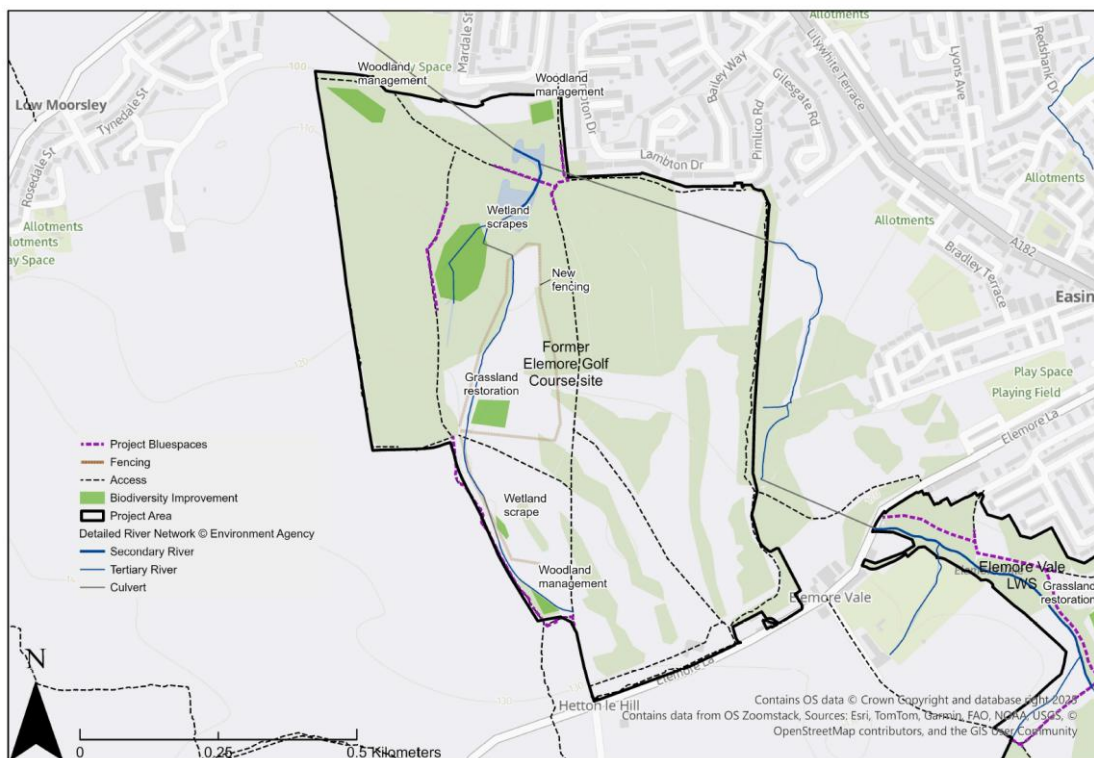
Total length of Bluespaces: 0.8 km

Links with Nature - Flint Mill



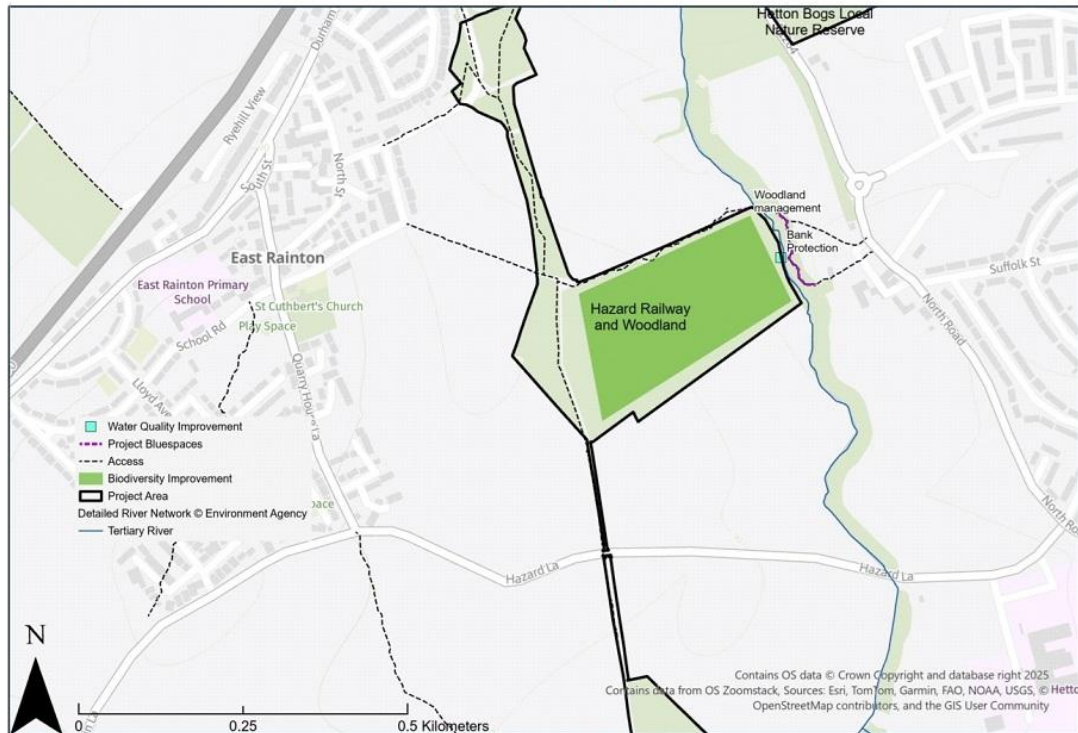
Total length of Bluespaces: 0.6 km

Links with Nature - Former Elemore Golf Course site



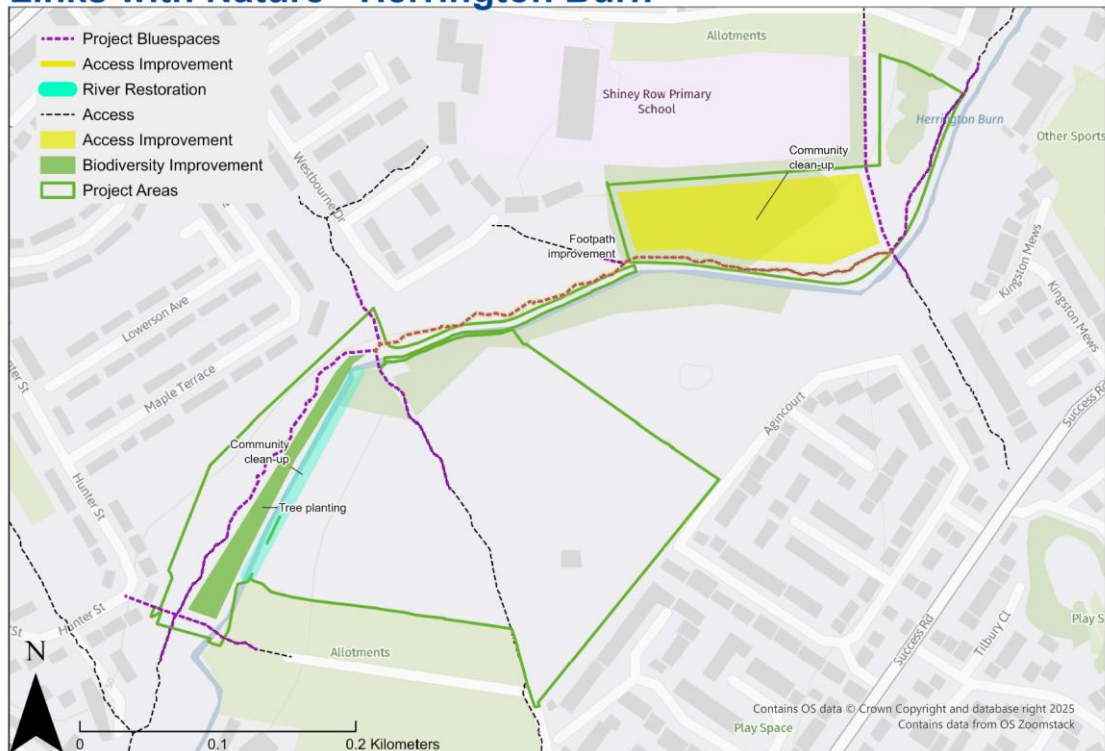
Total length of Bluespaces: 0.9 km

Links with Nature - Hazard Railway and Woodland



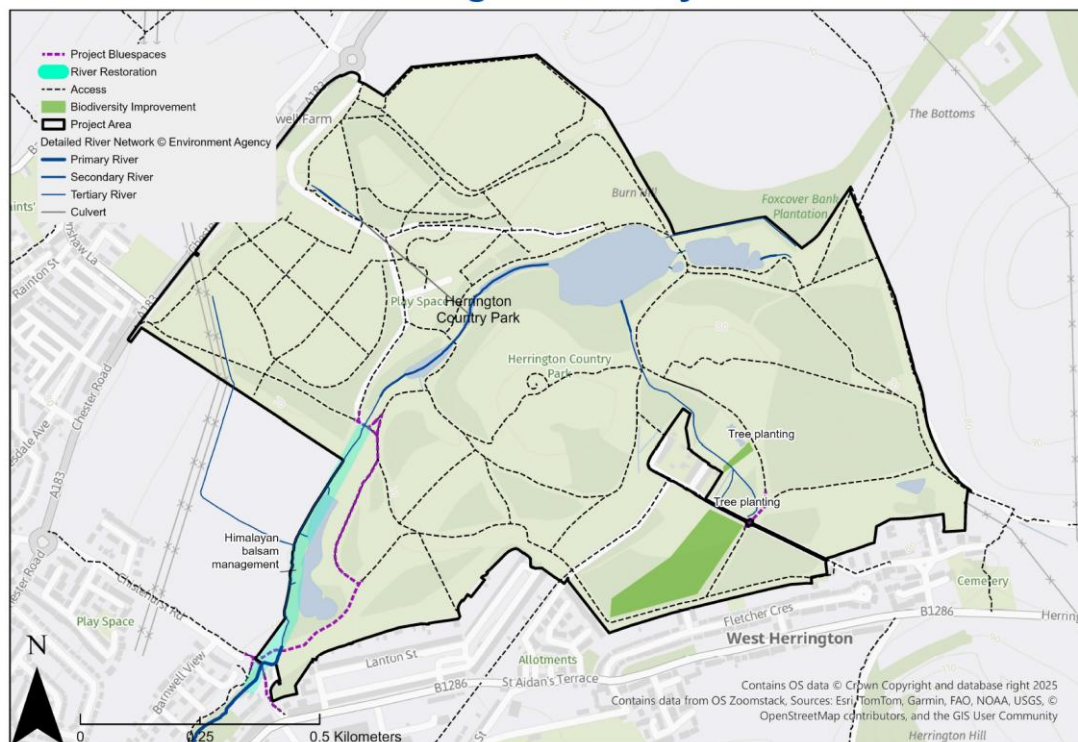
Total length of Bluespaces: 0.2 km

Links with Nature - Herrington Burn



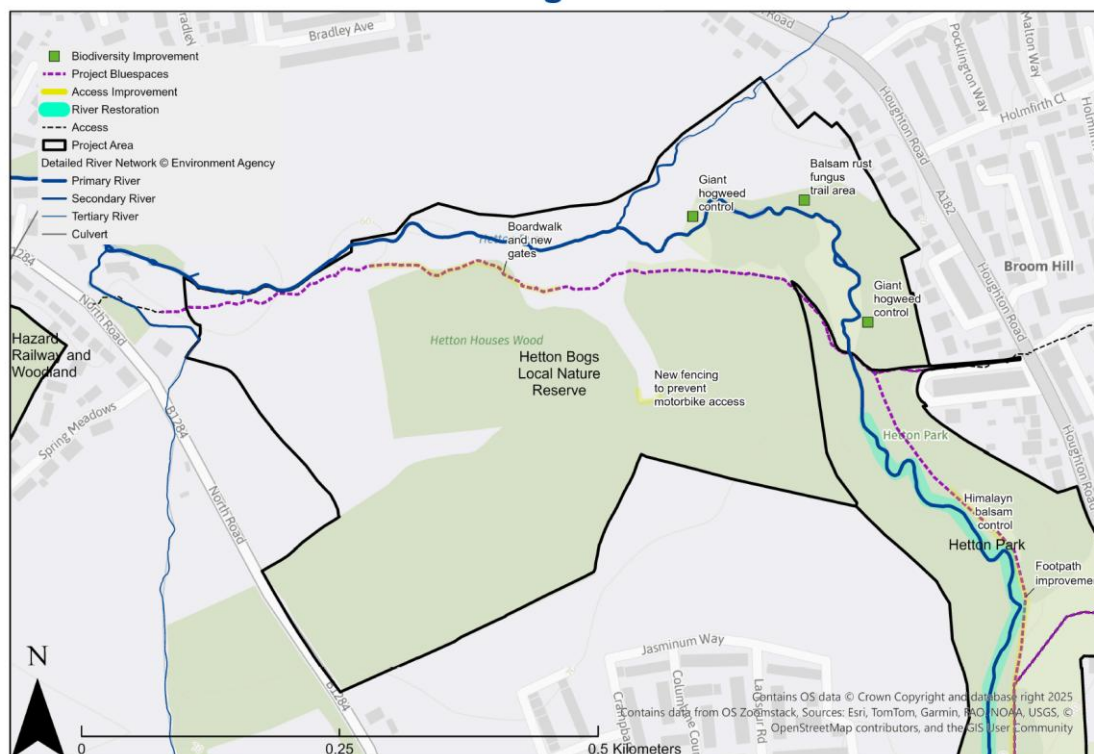
Total length of Bluespaces: 1.4 km

Links with Nature - Herrington Country Park



Total length of Bluespaces: 1.0 km

Links with Nature - Hetton Bogs



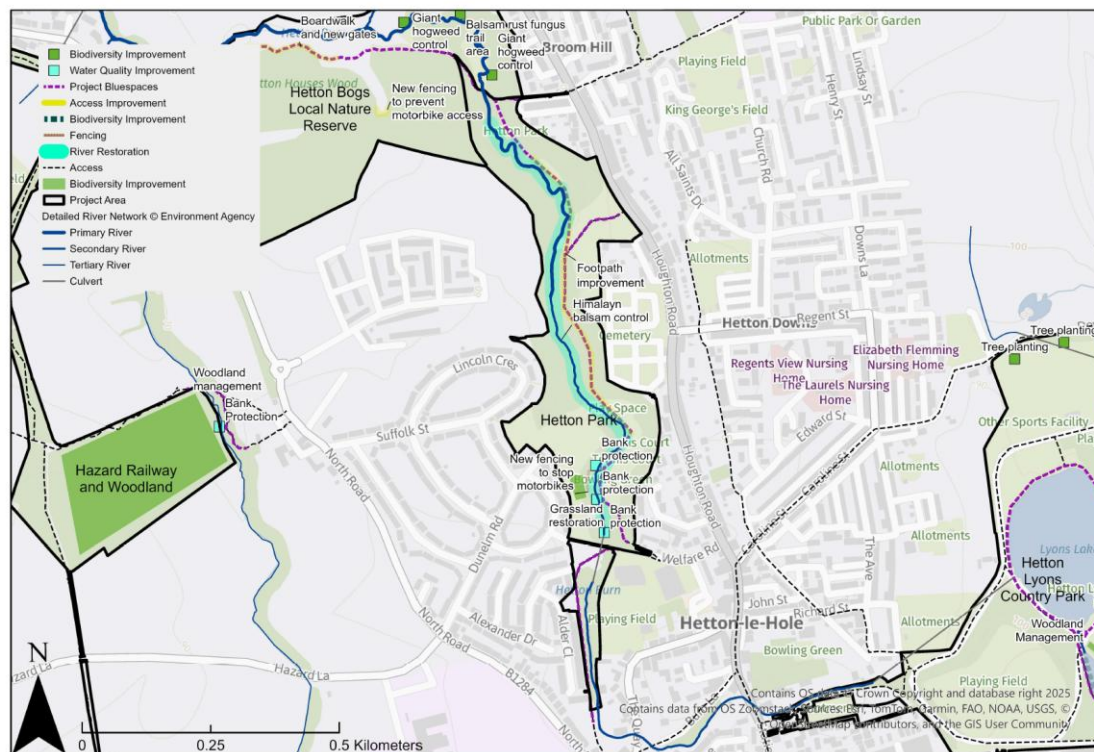
Total length of Bluespaces: 1.2 km

Links with Nature - Hetton Lyons Country Park



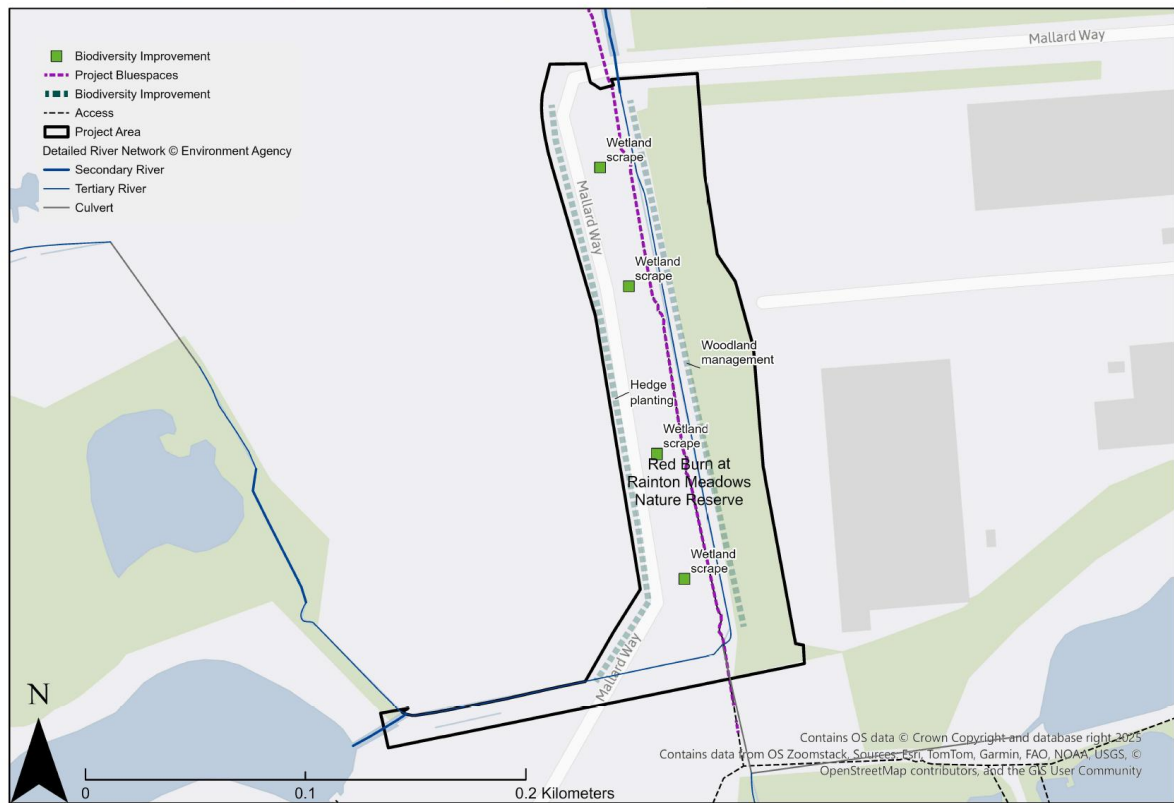
Total length of Bluespaces: 1.9 km

Links with Nature - Hetton Park



Total length of Bluespaces: 1.2 km

Links with Nature - Red Burn at Rainton Meadows



Total length of Bluespaces: 0.3 km

Figure 2: Bluespaces improvements at each Links with Nature project site where works have been delivered

Project Outputs, Benefits & Evidence Against Criteria

Access, Facilities & Recreation	
Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access and signage improvements will encourage greater use and ownership of water environments 2. Two long-term traineeships will support local residents in learning land management skills and gaining environmental work experience. 3. Project officers and traineeships will break down barriers to enable a wider range of people to access wildlife rich areas. It will engage underserved groups to revitalise and restore thirteen local green and blue spaces. 4. Volunteering activities and social prescribing activities, training and events will improve access and engagement with the environment and provide health and wellbeing benefits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A1: Increases access to, engagement with and enjoyment of the water environment ➤ A2: Benefits health and wellbeing through: ➤ A3: Influences positive environmental behaviours
Outputs	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New footpaths have been constructed and existing ones improved at Copt Hill (850 m), Flint Mill (705 m), Herrington Burn (611 m), and Success Railway (1085.5 m). A new boardwalk has been constructed at Hetton Bogs (120 m) and at Hetton Park new steps have been constructed and sections of the footpath improved by cutting back vegetation along 792 m of access. An informal footpath (300 m) was created at Hazard Railway. During the woodland management at Herrington Country Park 120 m of the existing desire line was opened up. The signage will be completed in the second year of Links with Nature and will include Northumbrian Water logos to acknowledge Bluespaces funding. 2. Two trainees were appointed in October 2024 on a 9-month traineeship. They undertook a programme of accredited training including chainsaw, first aid, trailer towing and brushcutter and learned new skills such as handling tools, coppicing, scything, fencing and building green bank protection. They continue to gain experience in working in different habitats including woodlands, wetlands and watercourses and have built up transferrable skills in leadership, planning and communication. They have worked with the team on supporting communication on social media with reels, writing blogs and events such as designing posters, and carrying out administration tasks, and have attended community events such as tree planting, litter picks and guided walks. 3. The Links with Nature team have worked closely with ten community organisations and local hubs within the Coalfield through the Voluntary and Community Sector network, connecting those groups with their nearest greenspace. All activities have been targeted locally and promoted via existing community networks and venues, as well as the project Facebook page, helping to build a new audience and increase the range of people accessing the green and bluespaces. Detail and examples of activities are provided in the Other Supporting Evidence section. 4. Links with Nature has run many different opportunities for people to engage with nature, supporting good health and well-being. Practical conservation tasks have been organised three times a week, providing opportunities for people to be more active, build up social connections and make new friendships as well as building confidence and self-esteem by being involved in a community activity. The engagement activities have connected people to the environment using a variety of techniques such as crafts, walks, mindfulness and many learning opportunities. The Links with Nature team have been working with Links for Life Sunderland, Sunderland City Council's social prescribing platform and supported by many partners including the Sunderland GP Alliance. All activities and volunteering are promoted via the portal and the project has received referrals for green social prescribing opportunities. 	

Evidence



New path at Flint Mill (left), and replacing board walk at Hetton Bogs



Visitors participating in nature-based activities at Copt Hill



Holiday activities at the Old Rectory



Volunteers helping with scrub management and dead-hedging



Volunteers and staff pulling Balsam at Hetton Park and Hetton Lyons Country Park



Northumbrian Water volunteers pulling Balsam at Herrington Country Park (June 2024), and the same site a month later

Wildlife & Biodiversity	
Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Habitat work will restore and create meadows, woodland, hedgerows and wetland areas. Improvements will be delivered to the condition and connectivity of designated sites (SSSI and Local Wildlife Sites) and priority habitats that support priority species e.g. water vole, otter and willow tit, working towards creating a high-quality habitat network in the area Control of INSS such as Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed will take place throughout the project area focused on upstream and identified source sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ B1: Improves the quantity, quality and connectivity of habitats ➤ B2: Improves the conservation status and or abundance or distribution of species ➤ B3: Reduces risk or impact of invasive non-native species (INNS)
Outputs	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Habitat restoration has been delivered across 12 sites (one of which has no eligible bluespaces), as detailed below, with work yet to start on the 13th. The habitat restoration work has improved the condition and connectivity of designated sites and priority habitats <p>Grassland Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work to restore fragile grasslands, including acid, lowland meadow and magnesian limestone grassland, by removing scrub has taken place at Copt Hill, Elemore Park, Elemore Vale and Hetton Park Infrastructure for the introduction of conservation grazing by cattle, including new fencing and water supply, has been erected at Elemore Park. The grazing will be coordinated by Sunderland City Council's Countryside team who will set up a grazing licence with a local grazier. Links with Nature has invested in a tractor with specialist cut and collect attachments in order to cut meadows, which have not been actively managed for many years. This will help to reduce nutrient levels and wild flowers to flourish. <p>Woodland Management and Creation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A programme of management of existing plantations has been carried out at Elemore Park, Flint Mill, Hazard Railway and Herrington Country Park. Plantations have been thinned to remove dead, diseased, dying trees and non-native species. This has created glades and more varied woodland edge to encourage natural regeneration and enable existing trees to mature and grow, promoting a more varied woodland with a diverse age structure. 6146 trees were planted at Copt Hill, Flint Mill, Herrington Burn, Herrington Country Park and Hetton Lyons Country Park (see Other Supporting Evidence section for more details). <p>Watercourse and Wetlands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greenbank protection to prevent erosion has been completed on Hetton Burn in Hetton Park, Moors Burn in Flint Mill and Sedgeleth in Hazard Woodland. Wear Rivers Trust led the sessions with Links with Nature volunteers. Leaky dams have been built in the watercourse in Elemore Vale to widen the canalised water course and create pools and marshy areas for wildlife. A series of wetland scrapes have been created in Elemore Park. Alongside the new footpath on Success Railway a series of seasonal ponds have been created to collect surface water draining from the footpaths and to maximise existing wet areas formed by unauthorised vehicle use, which Sunderland City Council is trying to address. Vegetation has been translocated into the new ponds from one existing seasonal pond, which had become overgrown. Four new scrapes have been excavated alongside the Red Burn at Rainton Meadows to help with water management from the adjacent fields and when the Red Burn over-tops. The Red Burn banks have been coppiced to open up the water course and create new habitats. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Management of INNS has been undertaken across 5 sites in the project area: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Giant hogweed and Japanese Knotweed have been sprayed and treated at Hetton Bogs, and Elemore Golf Course. A trial Rust fungus release is planned, in collaboration with Wear Rivers Trust, to reduce the impact of Himalayan Balsam in Hetton Bogs. Seeds were collected in August 2024 and have been sent to the Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI) for assessment to see if there is a suitable strain. The results are due in Spring 2025 and if the trial goes ahead the treatment will take place in June. Meanwhile, work to remove Himalayan Balsam took place in Herrington Country Park, Hetton Park and Hetton Lyons Country Park. 	

Evidence



Copt Hill before and after scrub removal



New water trough for cattle grazing and mechanical grassland management



Flint Mill tree thinning, before (left) and after (centre), and new trees planted



Elemore Park wetland scrape, and seasonal pond at Success Railway



Hazard Railway and Woodland green bank protection before (left), during (centre) and after (right) improvement



Giant Hogweed at Hetton Bogs, before (May 2024) and after (July 2024) control

Water Quality

Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Litter removal from water environments across the project sites will be undertaken, by partners, organised groups, and through public events 2. The project will help monitor and report on potential water environment issues relating to discharges and infrastructure within the project area, e.g., reporting dam build-up or pipe/manhole spills and supporting existing NW Water Ranger activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ C3: Improves state and function of water, including naturalisation, visual appearance, litter and odour

Outputs

1. Links with Nature have worked collaboratively with Clean It Green It to remove litter and fly-tipping. Clean It Green It is an initiative funded by Sunderland City Council to clean up areas of council-owned open space which falls outside the council's regular schedule. This group has done additional litter picks on various Links with Nature sites and helped to support the team.

A community clean up event took place in December 2024 on the open space around Herrington Burn and the watercourse (further details below), This involved Gentoo (15 staff), Wear Rivers Trust, Shiney Row Primary School (30 pupils), Sunderland Council and 25 volunteers from a combination of Clean It Green It (Springboard), Durham Wildlife Trust and local residents. Ongoing litter is being monitored and collected by the Clean It Green It team and larger items of fly-tipping are being reported to Sunderland City Council for removal.

The Links with Nature volunteers have been regularly cleaning up and litter-picking water courses and open spaces including Flint Mill, Elemore Vale and Hazard Railway. This has helped to prevent litter entering the watercourse and generally improving the appearance so they are more attractive for residents to enjoy. The team are working with other agencies including youth works, Gentoo and anti-social disorder teams to reduce anti-social behaviour resulting in drug and drink-related litter. In addition, there are plans to look at key access points where vehicles are getting onto site in order to reduce vehicular access and associated litter issues.

2. Although no watercourse issues were detected during the delivery phase of the project, there were two incidents reported to NW during the development phase:
 - At the confluence of Hetton Burn and Rought Dene there were significant numbers of wipes and debris in the water and on surrounding vegetation. This was reported to NW and the area was cleaned up.
 - Adjacent to the Herrington Burn is a large manhole and the cover was broken. This posed a risk because it was possible to lift the manhole and enter the chamber. This was reported by Wear Rivers Trust and repaired.

Evidence



Community clean-up at Herrington Burn



Community clean-up at Hazard Railway and Flint Mill

Additional & Secondary Benefits

Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Link Together will make a significant impact on the water environment, meaning the local area will be a better place to live, work and visit 2. The project is a priority for the Wear Catchment Partnership and delivers against the strategic objectives of Sunderland City Council regarding green infrastructure and the Sunderland GP Alliance targeted towards health inequalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ D2: Provides benefits to local communities, the local economy or NWG ➤ D3: Supports strategic project or investment into strategic partnership or landscape/regional activity

Outputs

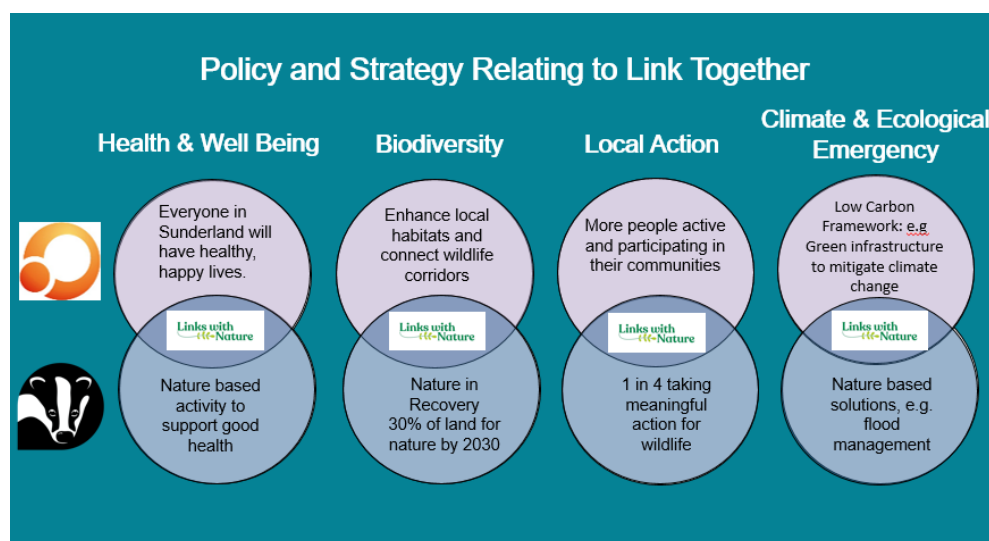
1. Links with Nature (formerly Link Together) is in the process of delivering a significant capital programme, in which one year of work linked to Bluespaces has already been delivered to improve 12 of the 13 council-owned green and blue spaces within the Sunderland Coalfield, restoring habitats and improving conditions for wildlife. Engagement activity with local groups to raise awareness and promote green and blue spaces has increased use and ensured that people feel more confident about visiting these areas. An anticipated project legacy is that promotion of green and blue spaces through Links with Nature events, activities, volunteering and regular walks will spread through the Coalfield and out to other areas, encouraging people to visit these sites.
2. Links with Nature has been identified by the Wear Catchment Partnership (WCP) as a priority project. The Links with Nature Project Manager has presented at quarterly meetings and at the WCP Celebration Event in October. They also participated in a recent workshop to set out the overall vision for the WCP over the next 5 years.

Links with Nature fits into Sunderland County Council's strategic objectives, which include their City Plan and the Healthy City Plan. Links with Nature is a member of the social prescribing platform, Links for Life Sunderland. The delivery of nature-based activities, such as practical volunteering, walks, natural crafts, wildlife watching and well-being activities on local green and blue spaces, support good health and well-being. The activities are free, easy to access, local and are targeted at the deprived communities within the Coalfield. The work being delivered by the Links with Nature team in collaboration with local organisations and hubs is breaking down barriers, building relationships with communities and encouraging residents to get involved and work towards improved physical and mental health

Evidence

See evidence in above sections.

Illustration of how Links with Nature is delivering shared partner objectives:



Customer Testimonies & Media

Emails sent to the project team:

Hi, my house overlooks flint mill park Houghton le spring and it's lovely seeing all the improvements you are doing there. Many people (myself included) did not even know this field had such a lovely name and I wondered if it would be posible to put signage up with its name, thank you

To-day I visited Flint Mill Park.I was impressed by the work of clearing and planting of the Trees,by volunteers and staff.I am looking forward spring and the summer when the area will have colour. Once again thank you all for the work done

I am glad that this park is now being looked after

Feedback submitted via comments cards about on-site work at Flint Mill

You have done amazing at Elemore keep it up

Brilliant, lived in Houghton all my life and this has made a difference

Looks great

Good walks for dogs and humans – it looks good.

Comments from events Survey

Pip was fantastic with the kids and was nice that Anthony took the children to see some of the natural habit homes ie shrew nest

Pip was great, very kind and nurturing and informative. Was a lovely positive activity x

Thank you for arranging this event. Appreciate all that is done to keep these spaces and encourage us to use them.

Really enjoyed my time today, Pip was very knowledgeable and friendly

Pip was inclusive, friendly and knowledgeable about her work and that of Links with Nature. Well organised, provided resources (although I would have preferred twine rather than wool and seeds rather than beads to maintain natural theme). Pip talked to everyone, listened to everyone and made us feel of value and individual. Gave us her knowledge and encouraged us to follow links on social media. The only consideration I would suggest would be of another couple of tables- so we could more ably assist more easily with construction/decoration of wands and webs with our children. Gent who was there (sorry forgot his name) was very helpful too, sharing knowledge with adults and children on Stephenson's railway route then with children about leaves, bark, trees, coppicing and much more. We all had chance to spot a kestrel high up and look for creatures under low ground covers. All in all 10/10. Even my grandson didn't believe 2 hours had gone so quickly. Thank you to all involved.

Feedback from Wavehill evaluation public survey after attending events:

*The majority of respondents reported that their **knowledge of wildlife had improved to a large extent** as a result of attending the events.*

*Many respondents shared that being in nature and participating in the activities **helped them feel better**, reduce stress, and enhance their overall sense of wellbeing*

*A key impact of the events was a **greater connection to nature**. Many respondents felt more connected to the natural environment, and this sense of connection encouraged them to **visit green spaces more often**.*

The events fostered a deeper appreciation for nature and motivated participants to engage with their local greenspaces more frequently

*Another key impact was that attendees felt a **greater sense of belonging to the community**. Many respondents expressed that participating in the events helped them feel more connected to their local community, encouraging a sense of inclusion and shared experience.*

Volunteer Feedback:

Motivations: *Volunteers are motivated by a mix of personal and environmental factors. They enjoy being outdoors in nature and fresh air, which helps improve their physical and mental well-being. Many want to learn new skills, gain conservation experience, and enhance local green spaces to benefit wildlife.*

Most valued aspects: *Volunteers find teamwork and friendship with staff and fellow volunteers among the most enjoyable aspects of their experience. They take pleasure in spending time outdoors, learning new skills, and witnessing the tangible results of their efforts.*

Support from project staff: *Volunteers consistently highlighted support, leadership, and guidance from project staff. They highlighted the excellent organisation and effective site management as key factors contributing to positive feedback. Suggestions for improvement included enhancing engagement with younger audiences, such as schools.*

Perceived longer term impacts: *raising awareness about the importance of green spaces and wildlife conservation within the community. For green spaces, the project helps preserve and enhance biodiversity, creates more accessible and better-managed habitats for both wildlife and the community, and works to protect these areas from development while promoting responsible use.*

Lead Partner Quotes & Testimonials

Having Bluespaces funding has been really beneficial to the delivery of Links with Nature, for various reasons. The additional match funding from Bluespaces helped us to secure funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and enable the project to go ahead. The Bluespaces Manager has played a really important role on the Steering Group, during the development and delivery phases, bringing additional insights and experience to guide the project team. The project is now at the mid-point of the delivery phase and it on track to deliver significant improvements across the 13 greenspaces in Sunderland's coalfield to enhance biodiversity, restore habitat and create better access. In addition, the Links with Nature team are working with local communities to encourage and empower greater use through volunteering and engagement activities. This will create a greater sense of pride and enable more people to enjoy the health and well-being benefits from connecting with nature.

Anne Gladwin, Links with Nature Project Manager, Durham Wildlife Trust

'Wear Rivers Trust are delighted to be involved in the pioneering Links with Nature project. In our role as a key project partner, we have been able to deliver a series of in-stream habitat works that will have a lasting positive impact on the environment of the Sunderland Coalfield, as well as upskilling and empowering local people and volunteers to be able to look after the wildlife and habitats they can find on their doorstep. Our work so far has focussed on the streams, becks and burns that crisscross throughout the project area. We have installed green bank protection at several sites, including Hetton Park, Flint Mill and Hazard Railway. These living structures prevent excess sediment from entering watercourses, preventing pollution and damage to fish spawning grounds and freshwater invertebrate niches, whilst creating new habitats. We have also installed a series of wetland scrapes at Elemore Park, which will hold water within the landscape providing extra flood resilience, and over time will provide habitat for invertebrates and wading birds. Another natural flood management intervention led by WRT has been the installation of a series of 'leaky dams' at Elemore Vale. Through mimicking natural processes and making rivers 'messy' again, we are able to encourage a heavily modified water course to re-naturalise, whilst having positive impacts on sediment load and flooding downstream.

Finally, WRT have been able to map, monitor and manage Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) across the project area. Links with Nature has allowed us to get to grips with a small population of Giant Hogweed at Hetton Bogs, before it was able to become dominant and cause lasting damage to biodiversity and public access. We have also been able to begin to get to grips with the Himalayan Balsam problem in the area, and have set up a rust fungus biological control trial at Hetton Bogs – the first of its kind for WRT. Japanese Knotweed continues to be managed throughout the project area too, which will have lasting benefits for bank stability and biodiversity into the future.

All of this has been achieved through careful collaboration with talented and approachable staff at Durham Wildlife Trust, whom we are looking forward to completing the full project with. The project has been well organised, and it is a joy seeing the positive impact of strong community engagement in an underserved area of the Wear Catchment.'

Jack Butlin, Project Team Leader, Wear Rivers Trust

'Springboard is a regional charity which, in partnership with Sunderland City Council, manages Hetton Lyons Country Park. The park is one of the sites within Links With Nature remit and we have been involved in the development of the project as well as now in its delivery. We are involved in several strands that run through the project the main ones are:

- The Tractor, The project funded a legacy machine that will be able to maintain HLCP and other areas of the Coalfield well into the future and culmination of the Links With Nature project. During the project, it will be heavily used to improve grass habitats in Copt Hill, Flint Mill, Elemore Vale, Herrington Burn and HLCP.*
- Tree thinning at HLCP, we have started the process of thinning several plantations on site, this work is going well and will be completed by Winter 26.*
- Springboards project; Clean it Green it Coalfield works alongside the Links With Nature project and supports where possible. That is day to day as some of the sites cross over, but also on a more focused basis where we are able to offer the tractor and our mule to support the improvements of greenspaces that the Links With Nature project focuses on.*

The project is a great example of partnership working, without one element, charity or group, the impact would be much lower. Working together with combined broad resources Links With Nature has been able to deliver more impactful work. Their work has improved all of the greenspaces from an access, aesthetic and biodiversity point of view and offers opportunities for community engagement and volunteering as well.

The funding from NWL has supported this work and continues to improve the area for the local people and nature.'

John Pooley, Manager, Springboard Adventures

'In its first year the Links with Nature project has already made noticeable improvements to greenspaces in the Coalfield area. As one of the main partners in the project, Sunderland City Council is providing funding and support to Durham Wildlife Trust.

Work has commenced on all of the sites and we are procuring many of the capital works, including footpaths, new fencing, tree planting, and signage. New footpaths have been completed on six sites so far improving access for residents. Trees and hedge plants have been planted on six sites, including a community orchard at Herrington Country Park.

The work of the volunteers and DWT staff have made significant impacts to the sites, and the litter picks in particular have quickly improved the appearance of some of the sites and are recognised by local residents who are becoming more engaged in the sites and the project.

DWT have worked with Sunderland City Council public health team to establish links with social prescribers and Sunderland residents are now gaining benefits from volunteering and the wellbeing programmes.

The improvements to the Herrington Burn and other blue spaces within the sites include litter and fly tipping removal, bank protection, flow management and reduction of invasive species already improving the appearance of the water environment. These works, which are partly funded by Northumbria water's Blue spaces programme, will improve water quality and habitats and make the sites more pleasant for residents.'

Rebecca Talbot Senior, Carbon Neutral Officer - main council lead for Links With Nature, Economic Regeneration Sunderland City Council

Other Supporting Evidence

Feel Good Thursdays leaflet, and participants

Feel Good Thursdays with Links with Nature

Feel good and boost your wellbeing with our free 6 week wellbeing programme. Join us for beginner-friendly nature-based activities for adults at Hetton Lyons Country Park. These sessions are aimed at those in the Coalfield area of Sunderland.

Thursday 13th March - 10am-12pm - Welcome to Feel Good Thursdays!
Join us for a gentle walk around Hetton Lyons Country Park, take in the senses and re-connect with nature. We will be joined by the Little Company of Calm to practice mindfulness, set our intentions for the programme and try Qigong - an exercise with gentle flowing movements with breathing and meditation.

Thursday 20th March - 10am-12pm - Wildlife Wander and Nature Mapping
We will wander through habitats at Hetton Lyons Country Park. Learn ID skills, let your senses flow and reflect on wildlife present by sketching sightings and sounds of nature. Binoculars will be provided.

Thursday 27th March - 10am-12pm - Wild Yoga for all
We will be joined by Wild Yoga instructor Roy Moor for a session suitable for all, taking place within the park. Relax your mind and body, tune into bird song and nature around. Mats will be provided.

Thursday 3rd April - 10am-12pm - Conservation Task Taster session
Help give back to nature at Hetton Lyons Country park through a habitat restoration taster task. There will be some hand tool use. Training, tools and PPE will be provided.

Thursday 10th April - 10am-12pm - Willow Woven Nature-based crafts
Take time for a creative outlet, make your own Willow Wreaths using foraged natural resources from Hetton Lyons Country Park and Links with Nature greenspaces.

Thursday 17th April - 10am-12pm - Mindfulness and Reflection
Joined by the Little Company of Calm we will practice mindfulness, gratitude and reflect on our time over the past 6 weeks.

For each session we will meet inside Springboard Adventure, Downs Pit Ln, Hetton-le-Hole, Houghton le Spring DH5 0RH. What3Words: ///sailors.enjoy.hologram

All sessions will take place outdoors. Please wear suitable outdoor clothing and sturdy footwear for all sessions. Dress according to weather forecasts. Let us know if you require any clothing or footwear.

We welcome any adult to attend, whether you refer yourself, have been referred by a Social Prescriber or a Community Provider. Should you require any support to attend please contact Pip before booking.

Contact Links with Nature
Pip - Links with Nature Engagement Officer: pjackson@durhamwt.co.uk
Call Durham Wildlife Trust and ask for Pip 0191 584 3112

Book via our QR code or follow our link: [FGTLWN.eventbrite.co.uk](https://www.durhamwt.com/links-nature)

Keep up to date with Links with Nature on [Facebook](#) and on [Links for Life](#)

Find out more about the Links with Nature Project!
<https://www.durhamwt.com/links-nature>

Links with Nature
<https://tinyurl.com/facebookLWN>

Durham Wildlife Trust Links for Life Sunderland

Durham Wildlife Trust
From Tree to Type

Links with Nature

Sunderland City Council
Supported by Coalfield Area Committee

Heritage Fund

Wear Rivers Trust

Durham Wildlife Trust. Reg Charity No: 501698





Links with Nature – Invasive Non-Native Species Update

Wear Rivers Trust

May 1st – July 31st 2024

During the period May 1st to July 31st the control of Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) for the Links with Nature project has been a huge success. Over 3 well attended sessions, an area of around 0.032 km² of Himalayan Balsam has been cleared at Hetton Park (0.63km of watercourse), representing the source of the troublesome plant on Hetton Burn. An average of 5 volunteers attended these events, putting in an impressive 60 volunteer hours between them. A similar story is true of Herrington Burn, with 0.011 km² of Himalayan Balsam cleared over the course of 67.5 volunteer hours during 3 events attended by an average of 8 volunteers (0.62km of watercourse). These efforts again represent a source population of the schedule 9 invasive, representing an alignment of Links with Nature management efforts, and the best-practice Catchment Based Approach. The management Himalayan Balsam window has ended for 2024, with plants now going to seed. Efforts are by no-means over though – sites that have been managed during 2024 will need to be revisited during the 2025 season, and management will need to continue downstream long into the future.

However, a different story is true of Hetton Lyons Country Park where a combination of hand-pulling by volunteers and staff, and a coordinated strimming effort by Springboard, has effectively eradicated Himalayan Balsam from the site. Follow up surveys will need to take place during the 2025 season, but we have high hopes that only a handful of plants will remain.

Another success can be seen at Hetton Bogs SSSI, where targeted treatment using pesticides has resulted in a 95% reduction in Giant Hogweed. The initial treatment was carried out on 31st May 2024, and a subsequent follow-up visit on 4th July 2024 revealed only 1 plant in flower, plus a handful of first-year plants (Giant Hogweed flowers during its 2nd year of growth). This marks a huge reduction on 2023, and means eradication of Giant Hogweed is likely at Hetton Bogs during the project timeline.

Beyond direct management, Wear Rivers Trust have also made strides forward with CABI – the process of trialling a rust fungus biocontrol site for Himalayan Balsam at Hetton Bogs is underway. It is now likely that we will be able to move forward with a 2025 release. WRT are also gearing up to treat Japanese Knotweed across the project area. Treatment will take place in late summer and early autumn, with mapping and partner engagement exercises taking place throughout August.

Summary

- 7 Balsam Bashes put on in total, 3 at Hetton Park, 3 Herrington CP / Burn, 1 at Hetton Lyons
- An average of 6 volunteers attended each event (combination of WRT and DWT volunteers, plus a cohort of Northumbrian Water Just an Hour volunteers)
- Over 130 volunteers hours in total
- Roughly 1.42km over riverbank managed
- Hetton Bogs Giant Hogweed well on the way to eradication
- Japanese Knotweed management to begin end of August
- Rust fungus biocontrol early stages to control Himalayan Balsam at Hetton Bogs

Access, Facilities and Recreation outputs

Community organisations and local hubs with whom the project has engaged:

- Space4: A community food project based in Houghton le Spring which provides a range of support to residents including a community foodbank, cooking projects, drop advice centre – close to Flint Mill.
- Easington Lane Community Access Point: This is a community centre which runs activities and offers support to residents including a community shop, toddler groups, men's health project, coffee mornings, youth groups, after school clubs and advice - close to Elemore Park and Elemore Vale
- Houghton Racecourse Community Centre: A community centre run by residents offering activities for local people including a youth group and drops in sessions for older people.
- The Old Rectory: A community-run centre offering support for residents and base for various community organisations such as Gateway Wheelers and Healing Opportunity (HOPs), the latter working with carers to offer respite from their caring responsibilities and provides therapeutic activities. Pip Jackson, the project Engagement Officer, is running a well-being programme with HOPs to help connect those carers to various local greenspaces close to the Old Rectory
- The Hetton Centre: close to Hetton Park and Hetton Bogs, is the base for the Family Hub.
- Wearside Women in Need (WWIN): Support women who have experienced domestic abuse and have a refuge in Houghton le Spring. Phillipa Jackson is running a programme of activities for women and children who have escaped abuse and are rebuilding their lives. These activities are providing opportunities to get out into nature and give the women the confidence to use local greenspaces independently.
- Shiney Advice and Resource Project (ShARP): The centre helps residents by providing advice on a range of issues including benefits, debt and employment and delivers training to help people back into work. They run a social prescribing programme to support people with financial concerns and run social groups and drop-ins. ShARP is adjacent to Herrington Burn.
- Friends of Herrington Country Park and Friends of Hetton Lyon Country Park: Two groups made up of local people who care for those local greenspaces. Throughout the project, the Links With Nature team have consulted them on proposals for the project and involved them in engagement activities.
- Springboard Adventures: A charity who manages Hetton Lyons Country Park on behalf of Sunderland City Council. They also deliver the Clean It Green It project which cleans up areas of Council-owned greenspace which falls outside normal maintenance regimes. They also support volunteers and trainees. Links With Nature and Clean It Green have worked collaboratively on numerous greenspaces to clean up areas and help deliver habitat improvements.
- Philadelphia Cricket and Community Club: As well as being a very well-established cricket club, they are an important hub within the local community and operate as a local warm space with funding through Links for Life Sunderland. The Club is very close to Success Railway and the Links With Nature team have run walks from the Cricket Club to connect people with their local greenspaces.

All engagement activities have been targeted locally and promoted via existing community networks and venues and the Links With Nature Facebook page. This is helping to build a new audience and increase the range of people accessing the Links With Nature greenspaces. Examples of activities include:

- A programme of nature-based activities at Houghton Racecourse Community Centre, which is close to Copt Hill.
- A well-being programme for HOPs, a local carers group offering carers respite from their responsibilities, delivered on three different greenspaces.
- A well-being programme with Wearside Women in Need working with women who have experienced domestic abuse.
- Volunteer tasks organised three times a week at greenspaces throughout the project area. The volunteers have undertaken valuable practical conservation tasks to help restore habitats and improve the greenspaces so that they are more welcoming and attractive. These volunteers include existing DWT volunteers as well as volunteers who have joined the Links With Nature tasks from the local area and found out about the tasks through word of mouth and seeing activity on site. This is helping to diversify the volunteer demographic.

Wildlife and Biodiversity outputs

Tree planting

- Copt Hill: 1350 whips and 23 hedgerow trees were planted along the existing boundary fence. Species include Holly, Field Maple, Hazel, Blackthorn, Hawthorn, Dog Rose, Mountain Ash, Beech, Oak, Cherry and Black Pine.
- Flint Mill: 2,000 whips and 32 standard trees were planted in the grassland areas to create open woodland pasture and avenue of trees. A native mixed hedge of 500 whips were planted.
- Herrington Burn: 40 standard trees were planted to create woodland pasture.
- Herrington Country Park: 66 standards to create woodland pasture and 52 orchard trees were planted.
- Hetton Lyons Country Park: A combination of hedges and standard trees were planted.
- Red Burn: 1150 whips and 12 standard trees.

Case studies

Houghton Racecourse Community Centre Copt Hill

Attendance and use of the Houghton Racecourse Community Centre, near to Copt Hill (only a few minutes walk), has been in decline and the committee had been struggling to keep the facility open. With support from local charity, Community Opportunities, the committee have been able to secure funding to employ a community worker. Their role is to generate interest in the centre amongst the community and develop a variety of activities for local residents including children, young people and adults. Links with Nature was able to support this ambition by running a series of nature-based activities to encourage people into the centre and generate interest in Copt Hill. Events have included wildflower walks to learn about the magnesian limestone grassland, two family events with wildlife safari, spotting sheets, quizzes and willow wreath-making and Christmas wreaths aimed at older groups who are less mobile.

Holiday Activities with young people at The Old Rectory

Links With Nature Engagement Officer, Pip Jackson led a programme of activity with a group of young people attending a Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme based in The Old Rectory. Each session was three hours with an average of 15 young people attending each day. The activities included orienteering and trust trail, willow weaving and making bird feeders, nature relay race and survival quiz trail, tents versus tarps, simulated fire lighting, mini-stick shelters, wildflower seed bombs, nature picture frames, hapa zones and nature woven frames.

The young people were from difficult and chaotic backgrounds often with additional needs such as autism and anxiety. The group included young people who have been excluded from school and present with challenging behaviour. The sessions were very successful, and the young people engaged in a very positive way with all the activities. They responded well to being outdoors, using natural materials for crafts and making the connection around how their activities can support nature. Feedback was extremely positive, and Pip built up a very good relationship with the group.

Hazard Woodland environmental improvements

The local water course at Sedgeleth flows alongside the Hazard Woodland. The woodland was planted around 30 years ago as part of a land restoration scheme and runs alongside a disused railway line, hence the name. The watercourse has become increasingly canalised and the channel has become deeper. Sections of the bankside are eroding and starting to collapse into the water course (below left). Over two days, volunteers from Wear Rivers Trust and Durham Wildlife Trust worked together to build greenbank protection. As part of the management of the understory, brash was collected from the woodland which was used to backfill behind the supporting posts (below centre and right).

Practical Conservation Tasks

The tasks have been held Monday to Wednesday from 10.00 – 14.00 since 5th August 2024. To date 85 tasks have taken place with the average number of volunteers 6 (lowest 2 and highest 13) and 81 people have been involved in volunteer activity with 2319 volunteer hours completed. The activities have taken place on Copt Hill, Elemore Vale, Elemore Park, Flint Mill, Hazard Railway, Hetton Park and Success Railway. Tasks at the other sites are programmed in over the coming months. The tasks have been varied according to the different greenspaces and included the following:

- Scything to clear bracken and rosebay willow herb to open up acid grassland at Hetton Park and Elemore Vale
- Thinning and coppicing woodland copses in Flint Mill and Elemore Park
- Building leaky dams in Elemore Vale in partnership with Wear Rivers Trust
- Moving timbers to create footpath edge in Hazard Woodland
- Raking up grassland after cutting meadows in Success Railway
- Scrub clearance in Elemore Vale and Copt Hill
- Fine-tuning the new scrapes in Elemore Park by putting in flow deflectors, brash bundles and reinforcing the bunds.
- Coppicing on the Red Burn at Rainton Meadows to clear over-hanging vegetation. Coppicing vegetation was used to create dead hedges providing shelter and habitat for invertebrates birds and small mammals.
- Community Clean-Up day at Herrington Burn
- Building willow hurdles and bankside reinforcement, and scrub management at Elemore Vale
- Scythe maintenance at Low Barns Nature Reserve to teach the volunteers how to clean and maintain scythes.
- Community tree-planting in Flint Mill and Copt Hill
- Building green bank protection at Hazard Railway and Hetton Park in partnership with Wear Rivers Trust
- Regular tasks at Elemore Park have included raking gorse from acid grassland, replanting sections of hedge using hawthorn from Copt Hill, clearing rubbish and thinning-out small plantations,
- Woodland management at Hetton Lyons Country Park to support Springboard's work
- Raking up grassland after cutting meadows in Success Railway
- Scrub management and tree planting at Copt Hill

Each week, Chris Knox-Wilson, Greenspaces Officer, has planned tasks for the following week, advertising them on the DWT portal for registered volunteers as well as promoting some tasks through Eventbrite and local networks. The programme is planned from week to week to respond to seasonal changes and to support work delivered through the capital programme. For instance, the work to adjust the scrapes was completed after the contractors had finished on site.

Each week, volunteering opportunities are posted on the portal, which is only for registered volunteers. The first few tasks were promoted in this way and a small number of experienced DWT volunteers registered to attend. This gave Chris time to get to know the sites, sort out the logistics and overcome any teething problems such as access, parking or other unknowns. This has helped to establish a core group of regular volunteers who are experienced and can welcome, mentor and support new volunteers.

The first tasks were at Copt Hill, Elemore Vale and Hetton Park. The team began to make an impact on those sites by opening up areas of scrub and clearing bracken. This has helped to give the project a site presence, show that work is taking place on the ground and presents an opportunity to talk to passers-by and local residents. These conversations have led to useful feedback:

- Flint Mill: Opening up some of the plantation by thinning out the small trees not only improves conditions for wildlife but also opens up sight lines to deter anti-social behaviour, making people feel safer and more likely to use the park.
- Success Railway: People have been really positive about the new pathway commenting it is less muddy, slippery and so more accessible. Residents have talked about the different birds and wildlife they spot along Success.
- Elemore Vale: Motorbikes have damaged sections of footpath, leaving it rutted and difficult to use. By clearing back scrub to open up the grassland it has made it easier for walkers and improved sightlines if they do meet any motorbikes.
- Hetton Park: Removing bracken to reinstate the acid grassland created better access and people feel more comfortable using the area. Whilst working on a warm September day, local residents brought out drinks to the volunteers and generally chatted about the park.

These conversations have led to people getting in touch and a few people registering as volunteers. There is interest to learn more about the wildlife and get involved in nature base activities. It is important to maintain that site presence and build up links with residents who do not engage in any community activities.

Volunteering opportunities have been promoted in the following ways:

- Chris wrote a blog about his first month doing tasks which is on DWT's website [Greenspaces improvements in Coalfields begin | Durham](#) and shared via social media.
- Volunteering is shared on Links with Nature Facebook page, which is connected to many local groups. Local groups are tagged into posts in order to increase the reach. This enables the opportunities to be promoted widely to local groups and through their networks
- Volunteering is part of the Links for Life Sunderland directory and includes a links to receive referrals.
- Each member of the team has a small flyer with information about their role and the project, links to the Links With Nature Facebook page and Links With Nature webpage, and their contact details which are given out to passers-by during tasks and at events. It helps to reinforce information and allows people to follow up on the project after the conversation or event.
- The Links with Nature webpage has been updated with details about each member of the team, contact details and links to the DWT volunteer portal. There is a Links with Nature [Facebook](#) page.
- Taster Sessions – Chris has met with community groups and offered to delivered a short taster session with them to give them first-hand experience of a practical task, on a site that is local to them and suitable for their capabilities. For instance, he gave a talk to the Marras Group, which is a men's social group, based in Shiney Advice And Resource Project (ShARP) in Shiney Row, and is planning to arrange an activity with them. Likewise, some of the green social prescribing taster event attendees are keen to set up a taster session for their clients or service users.

For particular tasks, flyers have been produced and distributed locally e.g. "Slow the Flow". This was a joint task with Wear Rivers Trust to build leaky dams in Elemore Vale. Posters were distributed to local venues e.g. Easington Lane Access Point and Elemore Park, directly via door drops, to local allotment holders and on Facebook. Individuals could attend the task as a taster event without being registered as volunteers. People can book on using a private link on Eventbrite. The links are included on posters and also sent out directly to target community groups and organisations who are close to a particular site.

Web Links

Links for Life Sunderland

<https://www.linksforlifesunderland.co.uk/members/become-a-member/>.

<https://www.linksforlifesunderland.co.uk/events/links-with-nature-wild-wander-walk-programme/>

<https://www.linksforlifesunderland.co.uk/directory-records/links-with-nature-volunteering-days/>

Sunderland County Council's City Plan (<https://www.sunderland.gov.uk/media/21728/City-Plan-Sunderland-2024-2035/pdf/CityPlan-24-35.pdf?m=1712826013140>)