

**Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy
2013-2026**

Darlington Borough Council

**October 2013
Foreword**

An Inclusive Approach

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Executive Summary

Darlington has an extensive green infrastructure network of multifunctional public and private green spaces and features linked in places by green corridors. Overall it helps deliver a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits for people and the natural environment including:

- Places for outdoor sport, recreation and play – meaning that people can enjoy healthy lifestyles;
- Space and habitats for wildlife to live and breed with access to nature for people – important for air and water quality, climate control, food and crop growth;
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation - for example flood management;
- Food production - in allotments, gardens and through agriculture;
- Settings for new development and regeneration – helping to attract investment to the Borough, and encouraging people to live and work here;
- Excellent off road green leisure routes - so that more people can leave their car at home particularly for local journeys.

It is also based on extensive engagement with green infrastructure partners. Key messages from partners are:

- everyone involved in green infrastructure should work together to achieve common goals;
- identify local priorities and deliver them in a co-ordinated way so that everyone has the same access to different types of green infrastructure regardless of where they live;
- support local people to improve, manage and maintain their local environment to encourage more frequent, positive use.

In response, the Green Infrastructure Strategy takes the priorities of a wide range of national, sub regional and local strategies and translates them into local objectives, priority actions and projects:

Create a quality, distinctive landscape and townscape. Priority issues include restoring landscape quality in the inner urban area and in parts of the urban fringe to create an attractive setting for investment and development. For example, a new linear park will be key to the development of Central Park;

Provide a connected network for wildlife to live, breed and migrate. This will be done by protecting more sites for biodiversity, improving the wildlife value of existing spaces and linking them with wildlife corridors. For example, there is an opportunity along the River Tees to plant more trees and plants to encourage more wildlife to move between the Tees and Baydale Beck;

Continue to improve off road green leisure routes and public rights of way so people can easily and safely move around the Borough for local journeys or for recreation. For example, improving access to Piercebridge from the built up area will mean that people can enjoy the western urban fringe more frequently and easily;

Improve the outdoor sport, recreation and play network. Priority issues include delivering multifunctional space for recreation and play close to home, improving the quality of what exists in places, and providing for playing pitches and ancillary accommodation;

Create an economically useful and productive landscape that provides for a more competitive, profitable, sustainable and resilient farming and food sector. For example, opportunities exist to make better use of low quality greenspace as allotments;

Minimise the impact of climate change by using green infrastructure to help manage flood risk and manage temperatures as the climate changes. For example, the new linear park in the Town Centre Fringe will provide space for water to go should the River Skerne flood.

Engage partners in the management and maintenance of open spaces. Friends Groups, allotment associations, community associations will have a more formal role in the management and maintenance of their local space, instead of the Council. For example well established Friends Groups will take part in a pilot 'handover' scheme at two sites.

This Strategy sets out our 13 year ambitions, objectives and priority actions. It is supported by an Action Plan which explains how we will deliver and make progress. It also identifies which partners will help with delivery. The Strategy will also be used to help secure and co-ordinate different sources of funding so that delivery can take place. A Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure provides detailed information on the different priorities for those promoting green infrastructure in each part of the Borough and who will manage and maintain them.

Why Do We Need A Strategy?

Green infrastructure helps deliver a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits for people and the natural environment including:

- Places for outdoor sport, recreation and play;
- Space and habitats for wildlife with access to nature for people;
- Climate change adaptation - for example flood management;
- Local food production - in allotments, gardens and through agriculture;
- Quality settings for people who live and work in new development;
- Space for people to walk or cycle between home, work, shops and school.

Therefore it is important that proposals for Darlington's green infrastructure should deliver as many of these benefits as possible, making sustainable use of green infrastructure and maximising the use of resources for delivery.

'This Strategy will enhance the excellent work that has already been undertaken [in Darlington] to integrate nature conservation and the natural environment and will open up opportunities for access and improve health and wellbeing in [the Borough].'

Malcolm Steele, Tees Valley Biodiversity Partnership

This new Strategy is an opportunity for us to reflect on what we have achieved over the past ten years and what we need to achieve in the future taking into account our vision to offer a multi-functional green infrastructure network that delivers multiple benefits for residents in each part of the Borough.

It sets out our 13 year ambitions, our objectives and priority actions. It is supported by an Action Plan (in Appendix 1) which explains how we will deliver and make progress. A Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure (in Appendix 2), provides detailed information on the different priorities for those promoting green infrastructure in each part of the Borough. The Action Plan and Guide will be reviewed and updated annually.

Green infrastructure is a cross cutting issue and does not stand alone. Policy context, including maps and links to other strategies (of the Council and other partner organisations) are provided in Appendix 3. This new Strategy will replace parts of other Council plans and strategies including the Open Space Strategy, the Allotments Strategy and the Darlington Rights of Way Improvement Plan. These will also be identified in Appendix 3.

Appendix 4 sets out what will be measured, how and by whom to monitor our progress. Appendix 5 sets out a glossary of terms.

Delivery of the Strategy's objectives will require contributions from a range of agencies and organisations across all sectors. It will help co-ordinate the many different organisations interests to deliver its objectives and will ensure that resources are prioritised to the areas that need it most, or the projects that deliver most benefits, thereby making best use of resources and green infrastructure itself. We will, therefore, continue to build on strong relationships and develop new ones to make best use of resources and to learn from best practice.

'The Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy... will enable green infrastructure to be provided as an integral part of all new development.'

Adrian Vass, Green Infrastructure: Principal Advisor, Natural England

We have developed this Strategy during a period of very challenging economic conditions, which are expected to continue. However, this new Strategy will be expected to deliver more, using fewer public sector resources than before. To achieve this, with partners we will maximise the value of public assets, ensuring the best value for money, and secure maximum gap funding from organisations such as the National Lottery to support our shared ambitions for Darlington.

'This Strategy builds on the mosaic of Darlington's urban area and connects it to the countryside, and also develops the countryside further.'

Gillan Gibson, Darlington Committee for CPRE

Our Vision

In 2026 Darlington green infrastructure network is high quality, multifunctional, and accessible, significantly enhancing the community's quality of life and the natural environment for wildlife.

Our rights of way network will be well connected, building on our strengths as a sustainable transport town, more people of all ages and abilities will move safely, easily, comfortably and more frequently along green corridors, through green spaces, historical parks and village greens on foot, by bike or horse between our distinctive, mature and valued green neighbourhoods and tree lined streets to an improving urban fringe and attractive, wildlife rich countryside.

To promote healthy lifestyles we offer a range of sports facilities in the town and urban fringe to meet the growing and changing needs of local residents, community teams and professional clubs.

Our extensive countryside is thriving, building on our reputation as a quality supplier to regional and national markets from pastoral and arable farming as well as for locally grown produce. Farms and rural businesses are sustaining jobs for local people. The role of wildlife is central to the high quality of soil, water and air that makes the landscape vibrant. We also offer sustainable energy crops and renewable energy initiatives as part of a truly green landscape.

Our landscape and townscape continues to be an important attraction for new investment and development; through quality, distinctive and well connected green infrastructure, Darlington will deliver exceptional quality of life benefits.

Key new neighbourhoods at Central Park, Lingfield Point, the Town Centre Fringe and in the East and North West have been developed with significant quality greenspace for sport, recreation, play and education and habitats and trees for wildlife. Sustainable drainage and flood storage will help the Borough mitigate the effects of, and help the natural environment adapt to climate change.

In 2026 Darlington's green infrastructure attracted visitors from outside the Borough and region drawn by the unique mix of quality parks and greenspaces, green venues and accessible heritage along the River Skerne, the former railway trackbeds and in the countryside.

In 2026 our green infrastructure will accommodate more protected and priority habitats and species than ever before; valuable healthy ecosystems will flourish, making them more resilient to climate change and the ever expanding mature treed landscape that occupies parts of the built area and the urban fringe provides extensive opportunities for recreation, biodiversity, food and fuel production.

Our local residents are our strongest asset. Working together, Friends Groups, Allotment Associations and other community associations manage and maintain all large local green spaces in the Borough to a high standard. Our partners offer an extensive range of expertise, skills, and training to support the continued development of quality local green spaces.

Darlington offers the right type and mix of green infrastructure, in the right location at the right time to deliver a robust, sustainable green infrastructure network in the long-term.

Darlington’s Green Infrastructure

Darlington is a green Borough; with a strong rural presence, distinctive river and rail corridors and tree lined landscapes, its green infrastructure network connects numerous public and private green spaces, landscapes and features (see overview **Map 1**).



Darlington’s Green Infrastructure Network

- Strategic green corridors
- Local green corridors
- Green wedges;
- Designated wildlife sites;
- Local open spaces: parks, cemeteries, wildlife friendly green space, informal open space, landscape amenity space, children’s play areas, civic spaces;
- Playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities;
- Ornamental parklands;
- Trees, woodlands and community woodland;
- Allotments and community gardens;
- Private gardens;
- Urban fringe;
- Agricultural land;
- Public rights of way network; and
- Open countryside.

Its got a distinctive landscape: Darlington’s green infrastructure provides links to its industrial, railway, Victorian and Quaker heritage, reinforces its natural features and adds value to new development, attracting people to live, work or visit;



‘West Park is the heart of a new community... creating a new, quality park in Darlington was an opportunity to make a difference. It drives the rest of the development, adding value to properties overlooking the park.’
Bussey & Armstrong, Developer, West Park

Wildlife friendly environment: one of the Borough’s best green infrastructure assets is its growing range of designated and wildlife friendly greenspaces, and protected and priority habitats and

species, which help mitigate climate change and improve local air and water quality;

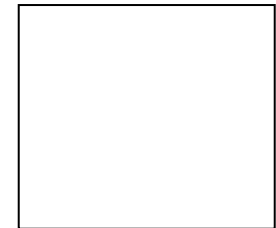
Its got an outstanding pedestrian and cycle network: existing strengths include green links to the Tees Valley and County Durham by sustainable transport. Darlington also has an excellent choice of off road leisure routes and public rights of way that go through parks, Local Nature Reserves and green corridors to help people move easily around the Borough;

Opportunities for sport, recreation, play and education: Darlington is home to an increasingly wide range of safe and affordable quality sport, recreation and play facilities close to home and unique green venues where people can learn about nature;

A highly productive rural landscape: is a significant contributor to the local, regional and national produce markets and contains several regionally renowned rural green venues which promote local produce and tourism;

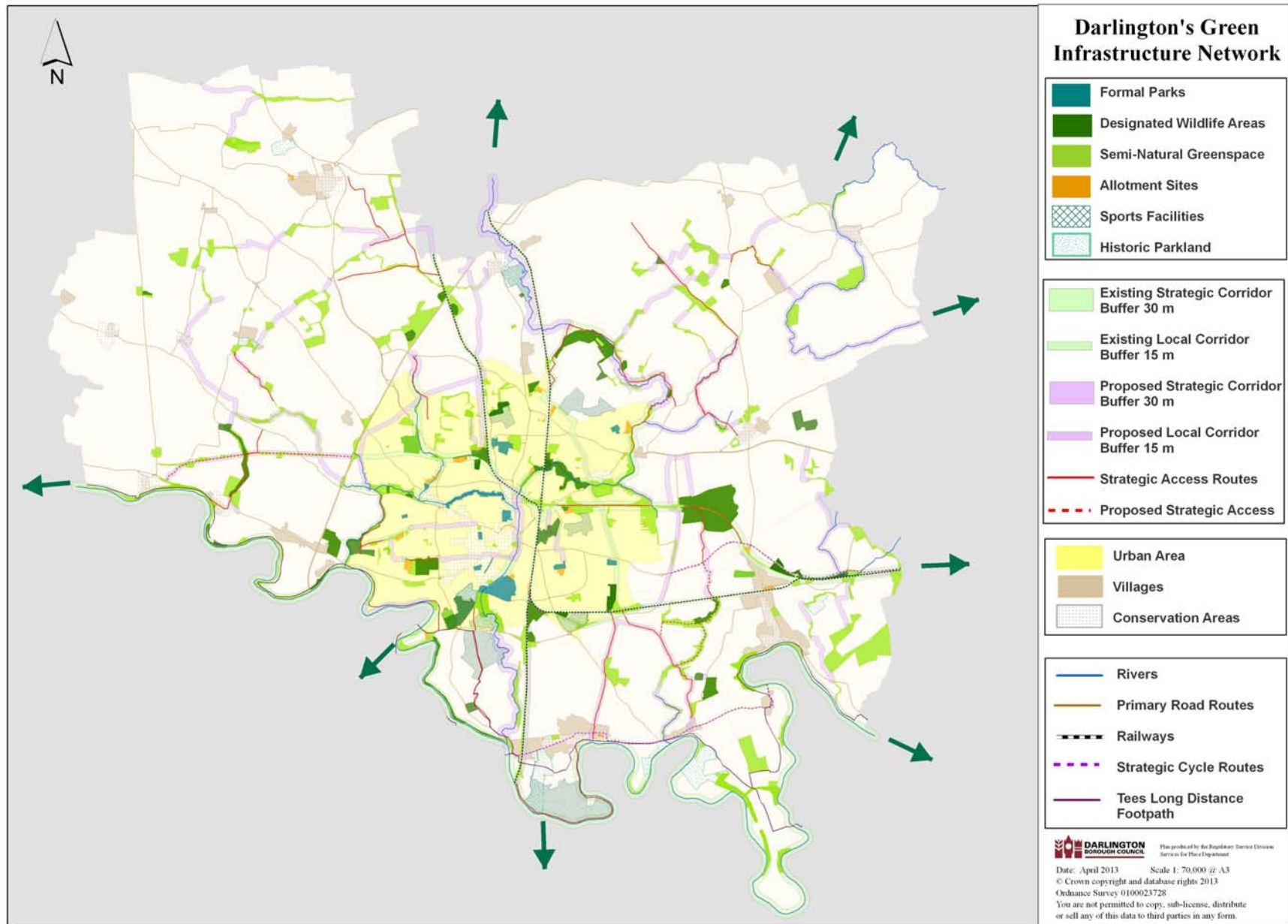
It helps minimise the risk of climate change: wind turbines and sustainable drainage are becoming increasingly common features in the Borough’s landscape helping to produce sustainable energy and reduce flood risk. Tree planting in new development and at greenspaces helps keep the built area cool in the long term;

‘The visually striking [North Wood] school with a low carbon, sustainable and inclusive design....has produced a quality learning environment and community resource.’
Gordon Chard, RICS Design & Innovation Judge



Opportunities for community ownership of parks and green spaces: existing strengths include the amount of local residents that help manage and look after their local green spaces. The successful management and maintenance of open spaces happens when local people who live closest to a space are involved, as they care most deeply about it, and spot opportunities or problems first.

MAP 1



What Has Been Achieved?

Considerable public and private sector investment has taken place in Darlington over the last ten years – which has significantly improved the quantity, quality and accessibility of green infrastructure in the Borough.

Major projects provided over the last 10 years include:

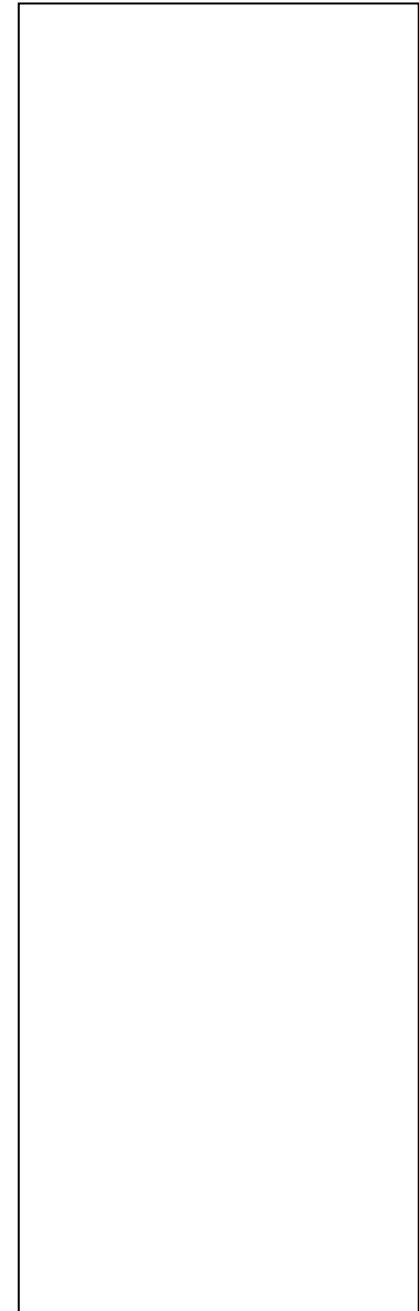
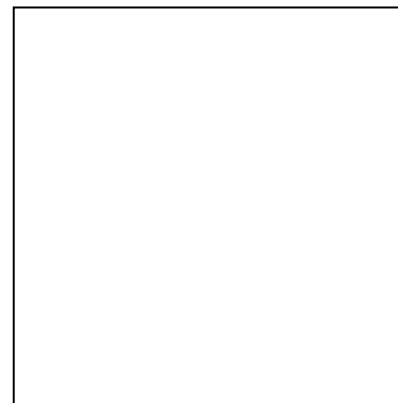
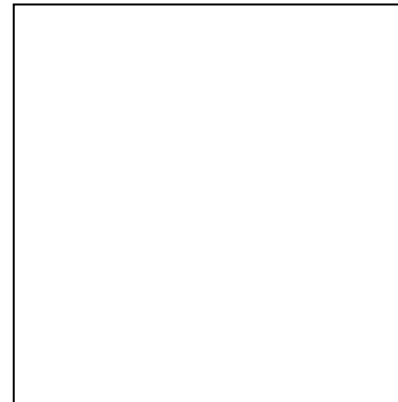
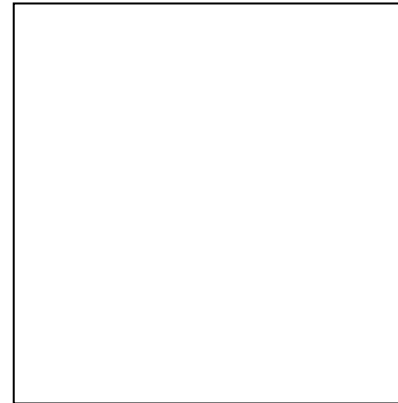
A new neighbourhood with 700 homes and **17ha of new quality greenspace at West Park**, on land previously used as a chemical works. Nationally recognised with the RICS Gold Award for Regeneration in 2004 this visually attractive, green landscape attracts people to live in the area. The innovative **West Park Levy** provides a multi-disciplined team including the Friends Group with resources for management and maintenance.

A £3.9m Heritage Lottery Fund grant **regenerated the historic South Park in 2005** – the restored Terracotta Fountain, bandstand and Edwardian flower beds helped the park achieve **Green Flag** status.

1.63ha of early successional derelict brownfield land was transformed into a robust ecological network - **Brinkburn Local Nature Reserve** spans three connected areas of woodlands, grasslands and wetlands. It is now one of Darlington’s most important assets for the protected Great Crested Newt, Dingy Skipper and the Little Grebe.

The 680 acre **Acorn Dairy farm** has used the **Organic Higher and Entry Level Stewardship schemes** to help nature keep its natural balance – widening and coppicing hedges and creating a 4ha wildflower meadow has seen a significant rise in insects and small birds, while new ponds are rich in amphibians and ground nesting birds.

Friends Groups now help run most parks and Local Nature Reserves – using **management plans** they ensure that their local space is managed to meet local needs. Friends Groups can more easily secure funding for new projects or improvements to add value to their space.



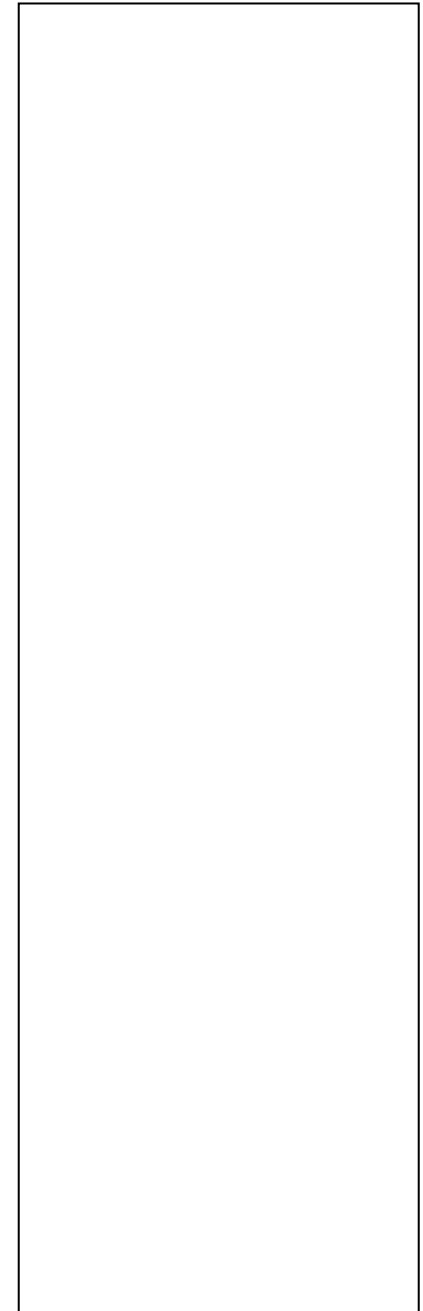
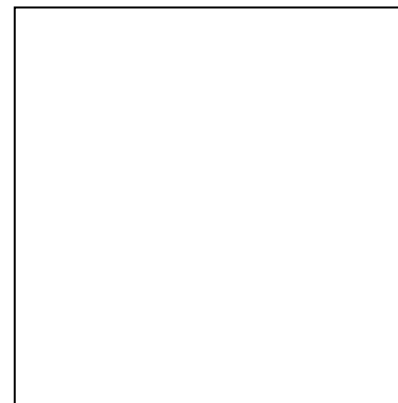
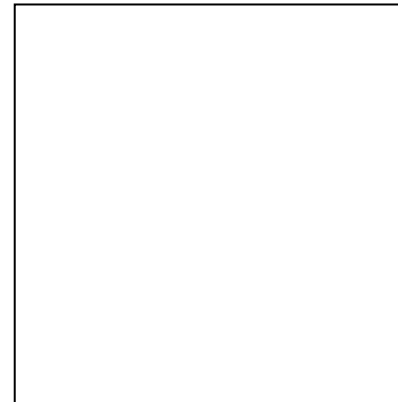
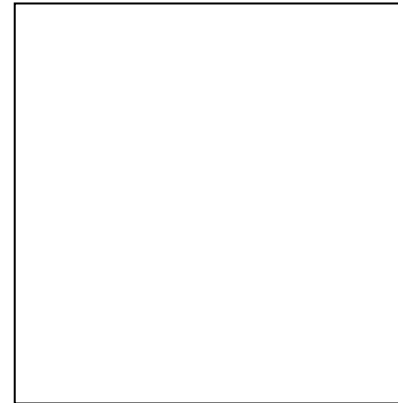
A £131,000 grant from the Big Lottery Fund at **Maidendale Local Nature and Fishing Reserve** has transformed over 7ha of low quality scrubland into a vibrant, accessible network of ten ponds surrounded by a mosaic of rough grassland, reedbeds and native trees. It is now inhabited by the protected Great Crested Newt, the water soldier butterfly, the broad bodied and the four spot chaser dragonflies and the regionally rare water soldier plant. Paths and platforms into the ponds ensure people of all abilities can enjoy fishing or experience nature at close hand.

A **new grass cutting programme** has reinvigorated over 25ha of low quality amenity grassland in the urban area. Planting wildflower mixes has successfully transformed areas of **Rockwell LNR, Cocker Beck and Baydale Beck**, resulting in a significant rise in invertebrates and a corresponding rise in bird populations throughout the year.

A **new off road green corridor for pedestrians and cyclists** (National Cycle Network 14) and a **new pedestrian/cycle bridge** over the A66 was an essential part of the **Eastern Transport Corridor** giving easy access between central Darlington and the eastern urban fringe. A new wildflower belt, ponds and wetlands at Red Hall are also important stepping stones for wildlife between town and country.

In 2011 two new football pitches were added to the four rugby pitches at Darlington Rugby Club to create the new **Blackwell Meadows sports hub**. Four more football pitches are being added so that local football teams can enjoy sport in a safe, quality environment.

£60 million ongoing capital investment has transformed the derelict **Rockcliffe Hall** and its surrounding **375 acres of parkland** into the North East's newest hotel and golf resort. Set in a curve of the River Tees this impressive 18th century house is surrounded by one of Europe's longest and most challenging **Championship Golf courses**, which helped restore the 19th Century designed landscape to its former glory. The new **Rockcliffe Loop** now provides access to this part of the Tees.

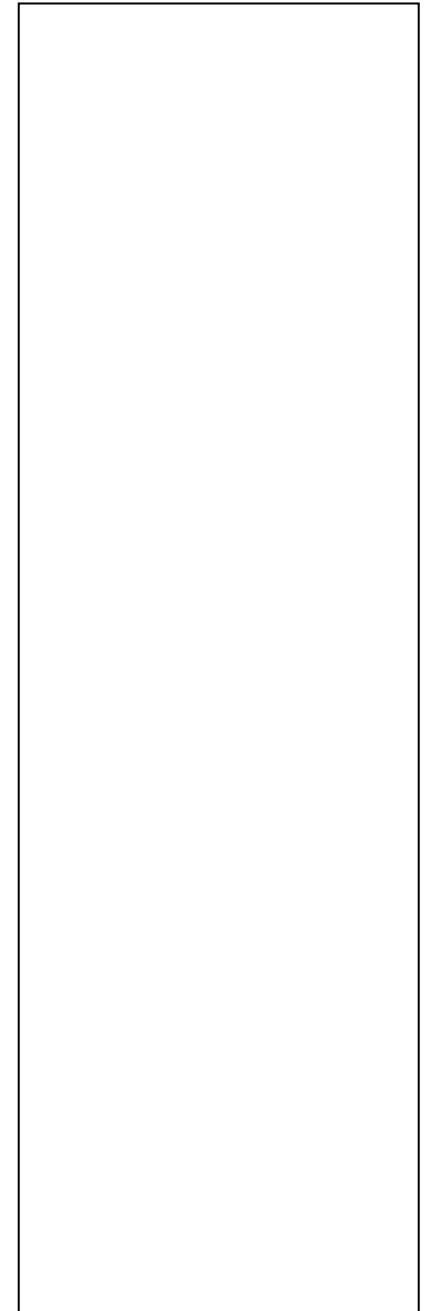
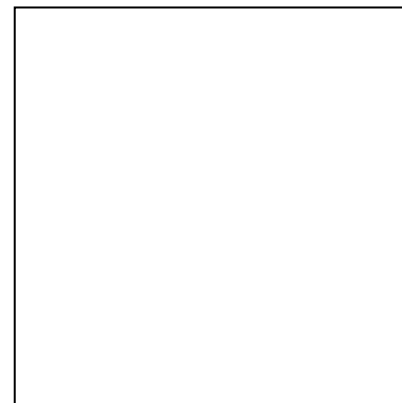
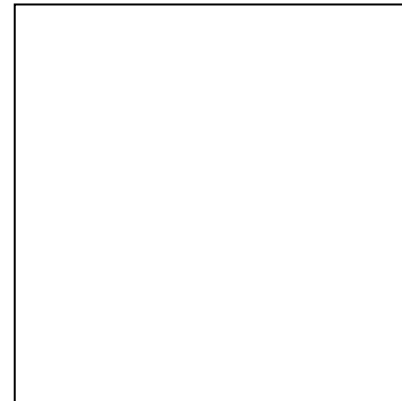
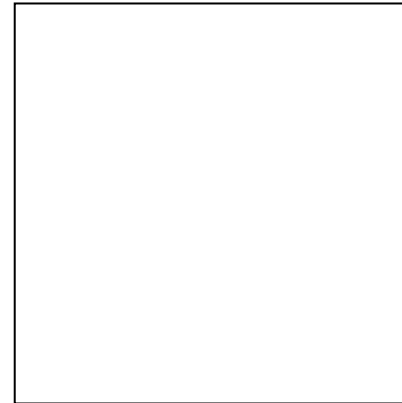


Almost £1.5million of Playbuilder and developer funding has been invested to significantly improve **Darlington's play offer - ten play areas** including **Broken Scar, North Park and West Park** now have exciting natural and adventurous play space for children of all ages.

The rapidly expanding **Farmway** is a highly successful **farmers cooperative** – the largest employer in the rural area, in 2012, it produced more than **80,000 tonnes of animal feed for the local and national market** and also supplies a range of quality rural products from eight sites to the consumer.

The **award winning Archers ice cream** made at New Moor Farm, Walworth is now a recognised regional brand sold at several outlets across North Yorkshire and the North East, employing many local part time staff. Recognised at the **North East England Tourism Awards 2009 as a small visitor attraction**, it is a popular green venue for a day out. A permissive walk gives access to the attractive Walworth countryside.

The £6.5million **Northwood Primary School** is an exemplar of **sustainable design, winning the RICS Design and Innovation Awards 2012**. Northwood makes little impact on the environment; its living green walls, sedum roofs and balancing pond reduce the risk of flooding and lower carbon dioxide emissions, while providing a softer environment for wildlife in the inner urban area.



What Needs To Be Done.....

Despite our successes, Darlington's green infrastructure lacks connectivity for people and wildlife, needs to support the changing demands of the working landscape and still includes some lower quality spaces that do not meet local sport, recreation and play needs. Some of our key challenges therefore are:

- **Restoring landscape character**; we need to re-establish native species and natural features in the rural area, restore natural river courses (specifically along the River Skerne in the Town Centre Fringe and at Cocker Beck) and improve the attractiveness of derelict land in the inner urban area;
- People living or working in a new development can add pressure to local green spaces. **We need to make sure that the right amount of quality space for sport, recreation and play** is provided at the right time;
- **Greenspace maintenance** can be a complex issue – we need to agree appropriate maintenance programmes for each new space depending on its type (specifically in large developments like **Central Park a maintenance levy will be negotiated**);
- **Managing parks and greenspaces with limited resources** will be challenging – ensuring local residents have the tools to take on a more formal management role of their local spaces through **Friends Groups** and **self management allotment associations will be a priority**, while changes to grass cutting regimes and revenue generation schemes will also be introduced;
- **Reversing habitat fragmentation**; we need to create a network of quality sites connected by wildlife corridors, stepping stones and buffer zones. This will help make sure that biodiversity levels in Darlington remain viable in the long term;
- Some landowners and farmers use **organic farming and/or agri-environment schemes**. But we need to find ways to encourage a greater percentage of the Borough's farmers to get involved so that more land meets entry or organic entry/higher level

requirements. How do we encourage participation while maintaining output?

- Some gaps exist in the sustainable transport and public rights of way network. **Improving connectivity for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians** to the urban fringe, the rural area and between greenspaces and to new development remains a priority for the Borough;
- Some small gaps exist in the accessible open space network. Promoting healthy lifestyles by **improving the quantity and quality of accessible greenspace to meet local needs** remains a high priority;
- **More, quality football pitches are needed to meet the demand for junior football and rugby**. Therefore improving access to affordable, quality pitches in managed locations remains a high priority;
- Although not just a Darlington specific issue, **the changing economy is putting increasing pressure on those working in the Borough's large rural area**. How do we all effectively support the farming sector, rural businesses and enterprises to help them diversify and grow?
- Darlington like other parts of the country is increasingly **at risk from flooding**. We need to give increased emphasis to protecting and restoring **green infrastructure next to watercourses for flood plains and by using sustainable drainage** in new development to reduce surface water run off. In the Town Centre Fringe and Eastern Urban Fringe this is a high priority;
- **Sensitively accommodating renewable energy** - significant potential exists in the urban fringe and rural area to produce biomass and biofuels, and to deliver other types of renewable energy. This can also help Darlington deliver long term local, Tees Valley and national energy targets.

Moving Forward

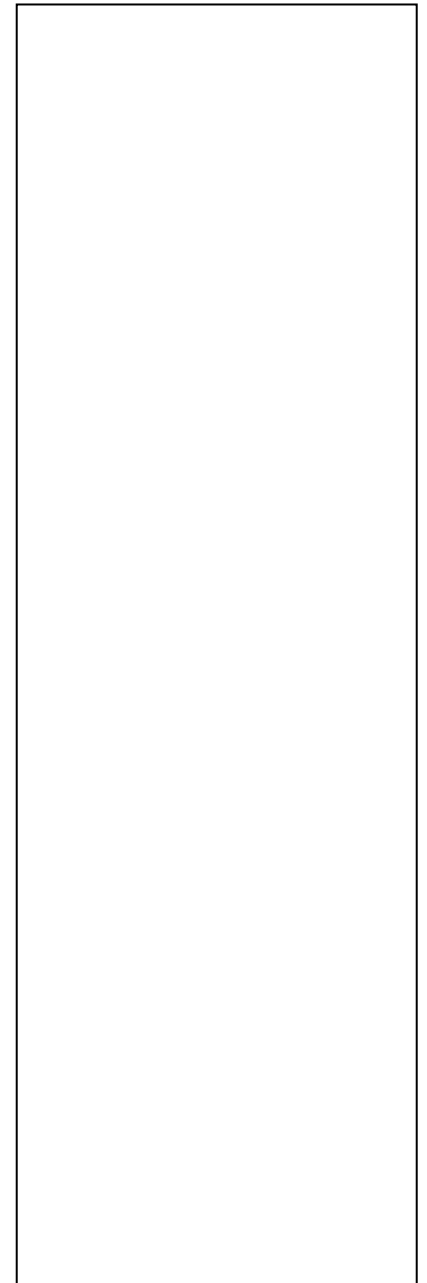
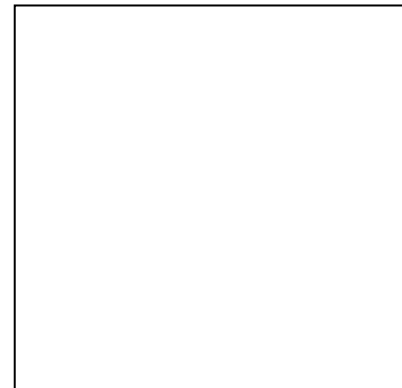
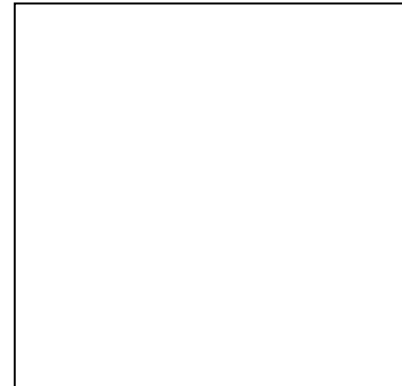
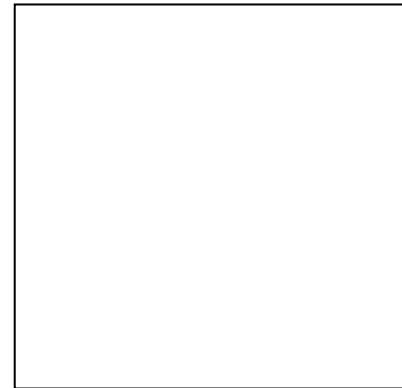
These issues need to be delivered in a challenging economic landscape. Key to future growth will be making better use of existing green infrastructure thereby adding value to what exists, meeting local needs close to home. New greenspace particularly through large new developments will complement these improvements.

Public expenditure will be severely limited and therefore grant and gap funding will be at a premium. This will require the Council and partners to prioritise activities seeking public funding to ensure the best possible use of resources. Projects that deliver more than one objective will be prioritised so that multiple benefits can be delivered in a realistic timeframe to meet the needs of local people, wildlife and the environment itself.

To succeed, new ways of working and new ideas will be used to help tackle this ambitious Strategy. This will mean us making better use of our collective resources by identifying the organisation best placed to deliver, manage and maintain green infrastructure in Darlington. Using this approach there could potentially be a higher success rate in securing funding from organisations including the National Lottery for projects.

In many cases the most successful management and maintenance of open spaces happens when local people who live closest to a space are involved in the process, as they care most deeply about it, and spot opportunities or problems before anyone else. Friends Groups, allotment associations and community associations already help look after and improve parks, Local Nature Reserves, allotments, bowling greens and other greenspaces. Building on this, more local people will be encouraged to get involved; taking over the management and maintenance of a local space, sharing knowledge and expertise to plan and deliver projects, submitting bids for funds for improvements works, joining a Friends Group or an Allotment Association or by attending a fundraising event, will together help deliver the objectives in this Strategy.

Measuring Our Performance (in Appendix 4) sets out detailed project specifications, funding streams and detailed timescales for delivery.



Priorities for Action

To address our challenges and barriers to creating a green infrastructure network our priorities for action include:

	Objective	Actions	Priority Actions
1.	Create a quality distinctive landscape and townscape	Action 1	Protect and improve natural and built green heritage assets.
		Action 2	Restore the natural course and riparian features of rivers and becks.
		Action 3	Strengthen the character and landscape quality of the urban fringe and the countryside.
		Action 4	Create a quality environment to attract new development and promote regeneration.
2.	Provide a connected network of healthy, wildlife rich, natural ecosystems	Action 1	Improve the amount and mix of protected and priority habitats and species in the urban area.
		Action 2	Improve the biodiversity value of the urban fringe and rural area.
		Action 3	Provide more stepping stones and buffer zones for wildlife to move more easily.
		Action 4	Maintain and improve the Borough's air and water quality.
3.	Contribute to initiatives to maintain, expand and enhance an accessible green network for people	Action 1	Provide connections so that people can move easily between urban green spaces, the urban fringe and the countryside.
		Action 2	Design green infrastructure for safe, positive use by people of all age groups and abilities.
4.	Promote outdoor sport, recreation, play and education	Action 1	Protect and enhance facilities for sport, recreation and play in the urban area.
		Action 2	Create a softer urban fringe and rural area for sport and recreation.
		Action 3	Provide opportunities for people to learn about nature and the environment.
		Action 4	Engage more local people in the design or re-design of locally important open spaces.
5.	Create an economically useful and productive landscape	Action 1	Support initiatives for maintaining and expanding the farming sector.
		Action 2	Promote initiatives that expand local food production.
		Action 3	Support initiatives for expanding the renewable energy sector.
6.	Minimise the impact of, and adapt to the effects of climate change	Action 1	Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and minimise the use of resources.
		Action 2	Minimise the risk of flooding and pollution.
		Action 3	Provide for species adaptation.
7.	Promote initiatives to engage partners in the long term management and maintenance of parks and green spaces	Action 1	Encourage more community groups provide the long term management and maintenance of local green spaces
		Action 2	Promote initiatives to make better use of lower quality amenity greenspace
		Action 3	Support initiatives to generate income from green space

The Action Plan 2013-2026

The Action Plan 2013-2026 (see Appendix 1) identifies the priority actions we intend to deliver under each of the seven objectives. Under each objective we outline the rationale, the actions we aim to take, and explain exactly what we will do to ensure delivery. The Action Plan also sets out the broad timetable for delivery. Actions will be delivered along twelve green corridors and the rural area (see **Map 1**):

➔ Strategic green corridors:

- 1 River Tees Corridor
- 3 River Skerne Corridor
- 4 River Skerne Corridor To Faverdale
- 5 Darlington, Middleton St. George, A66/A67 Corridor to Stockton

The numbers are the same as the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy; there is no corridor 2.

Local green corridors:

- A Former Barnard Castle Trackbed
- B Cocker Beck
- C West Beck
- D Baydale Beck
- E Salters Lane
- F Nunnery Lane-Cemetery Lane Corridor
- G Central Park Corridor
- H A66 Corridor

Rural area: all green infrastructure outside the urban area.

Each corridor has one or more projects identified to deliver the objectives and priority actions. Some of the corridors exist, others are proposed. The Green Infrastructure Guide (see Appendix 2), supplements the Action Plan and provides a detailed guide to each corridor, identifying locally specific priorities and provides more information about each project.

The Action Plan and Guide will be reviewed and updated annually to take into account new development opportunities, available funding and the economic climate.

