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**DARLINGTON GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member Councillor  
Councillor Nick Wallis, Leisure and Local Environment Portfolio**

**Responsible Director - Richard Alty (Director of Place)**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. To seek Members' approval of the Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy 2013-2026. A copy of the document is attached (**see Appendix 1**) and is available on the Council's website at [www.darlington.gov.uk/planningpolicy](http://www.darlington.gov.uk/planningpolicy)

**Summary**

2. This new Green Infrastructure Strategy sets out our ambitions and objectives to deliver a strategic, coordinated framework to enable the effective and efficient future development, management and maintenance of Darlington's green infrastructure network to 2026. As a cross-cutting document it is primarily written for, and has been prepared in consultation with, key delivery partners; Friends Groups, allotment associations, community groups, developers, statutory organisations as well as the different Council services that are expected to help develop, manage and communicate the benefits of the Borough's green infrastructure network over the Strategy's lifetime.
3. The network is focussed around twelve green corridors and the rural area which link a range of public and private multi-functional green spaces and features. It is well used for recreation, biodiversity and food production but more can be made of the extensive space available. Building on Darlington's unique selling point as a high quality green environment to live and work in, we can begin to use green infrastructure more successfully to address some of the wider environmental, social and economic issues Darlington's community faces; improving the health and well being of residents, encouraging sustainable travel, improving the productivity and value of the countryside and promoting the regeneration of Darlington's neighbourhoods can all be partly addressed through gradually improving green infrastructure.

4. The Strategy reflects on the many achievements made to green infrastructure in the Borough over the last 10 years and identifies the issues and opportunities ahead. It is deliberately succinct and focused on the actions that need to happen to achieve the identified objectives, particularly within a challenging economic climate. To this end, the main document only sets out the high level messages and actions, whilst much of the detail is contained in appendices, including the supporting Action Plan (**see Appendix 2**) and A Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure (**see Appendix 3**). The appendices are living documents; designed to be updated annually so as to respond to changing priorities, or should funding become available to deliver projects sooner than anticipated.
5. Each part of the Borough has a different mix of green infrastructure, as a result the issues and opportunities each area face varies. The Action Plan explains how the Strategy's objectives will be delivered through a series of priority actions and projects; more will be made of the existing network, while new provision will add value to meet the needs of local people, wildlife and the environment itself. A Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure is designed for those interested in promoting green infrastructure in the Borough – it identifies the types of green infrastructure required on a corridor by corridor basis to meet the specific needs in that part of Darlington
6. Sustainable management and maintenance of green infrastructure in the future, particularly of Council owned space, is a key cross cutting issue in the Strategy. The Action Plan explains how, through a range of mechanisms, green space will be managed and maintained by a range of partners in a more cost effective way, while ensuring the quality and biodiversity value of the environment that residents enjoy is not lost.
7. By identifying the key green infrastructure issues and different priorities that should be addressed in each local area, once approved these documents will provide a degree of certainty for those interested in promoting green infrastructure in the Borough. By doing so they will make it easier for partners to bid for funding from other organisations such as the National Lottery, in order to deliver them.
8. This Strategy does not stand alone; it helps deliver elements of other Council strategies e.g. the Darlington Economic Strategy and the Third Local Transport Plan, as well as those of other organisations including the Tees Valley Biodiversity Action Plan and the Environment Agency's Northumbria River Basin Management Plan. It will also be a key part of the new Local Plan evidence base, informing the emerging Making and Growing Places document (Cabinet 4 June 2013 C171 (3)) and other planning policy documents, development briefs and masterplans, so that green infrastructure remains central to the sustainable development of the Borough.
9. It is also closely linked to the themes in One Darlington: Perfectly Placed; protecting and enhancing the attractive green environment residents' value, helping to create a high quality, distinctive, safe and sustainable natural environment for local people and for those who wish to visit or invest in the Borough are key work strands.

10. The draft Strategy and Action Plan were subject to stakeholder and community consultation from the 5 September-3 October 2012. All responses have been considered and where appropriate, changes to the draft Strategy and Action Plan made (see paragraph 36).

**Recommendation**

11. It is recommended that the contents of the Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy 2013-2026 be approved

**Reasons**

12. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-

- (a) To reflect the recent changes in national and local green infrastructure policy;
- (b) To coordinate the planning, design, management and maintenance of green infrastructure in the Borough;
- (c) To provide a clear set of objectives and actions across a broad green infrastructure agenda for all green infrastructure partners to work with;
- (d) To complete preparation of a key part of the Local Plan evidence base

**Richard Alty  
Director of Place**

**Background Papers**

- (i) Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy 2013-2026
- (ii) Darlington Green Infrastructure Action Plan 2013-2026
- (iii) A Guide to Darlington’s Green Infrastructure 2013-2026

Karen Johnson: Extension 2047

S17 Crime and Disorder	The design and re-design of green spaces can have a positive impact on the Council's ability to consider issues of crime, disorder and anti social behaviour.
Health and Well Being	A key objective is to promote outdoor sport, recreation and play; delivery of the Strategy will encourage and enable people to lead more active lifestyles and improve health and well being.
Sustainability	A key objective is to use green infrastructure to minimise the impact of, and adapt to the effects of climate change; delivery of the Strategy can help reduce flood risk and deliver sustainable development to help reduce the Borough’s carbon footprint.
Diversity	A priority action is to design green infrastructure so

	that people of all age groups and abilities can access and use green infrastructure safely and easily in the Borough.
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no changes to the budget or policy framework arising from this Strategy.
Key Decision	No.
Urgent Decision	No.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	Delivering and improving Darlington's green infrastructure strongly reflects the vision, themes and work strands of One Darlington: Perfectly Placed.
Efficiency	By setting out key priorities the Strategy will focus the use of resources to areas of agreed importance which should lead to savings in expenditure and officer time. It will also help plan for, fund and coordinate green infrastructure to support the Core Strategy's growth strategy.

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

11. Previously, green infrastructure has largely been thought of as green spaces used for recreation and play and as protected spaces where wildlife live. But national and local policy now considers it to be all public and private green spaces, landscapes and natural features in the urban and rural area.
12. Rather than having lots of spaces providing different functions, such as sport, recreation and play, or providing for amenity, biodiversity, movement, food production, landscape quality and climate control, it is more efficient and sustainable for each space or feature to provide for many functions. Some may be more obvious than others but all are equally important e.g. South Park provides for sport, recreation, play and wildlife but it is also a valuable flood storage area, helping to mitigate the impact of climate change.
13. Consistent with up to date national and sub regional guidance, rather than managing and developing green infrastructure in a piecemeal fashion, a comprehensive, coordinated landscape-scale approach to providing, managing and maintaining multi-functional green infrastructure across the Borough will be adopted. Making the most of the existing green infrastructure network, using land for what it is best suited to and adding value where appropriate to meet local needs, will continue to be a priority.
14. Actions and projects that deliver more than one of the Strategy's objectives have been prioritised so that more benefits can be delivered at a local and Borough level. For example, while a new green corridor in the Town Centre Fringe will manage flood risk, it will also provide all the benefits of a linear park so space for recreation, wildlife, cycling and walking will be built in, maximising the benefits green infrastructure can deliver to people living and working in this central location.

This approach also makes best use of the resources available; promoting multi-functionality increases the opportunities for securing funding from a wider range of funding streams, important for delivery and management in a challenging economic climate.

## **Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy**

15. This new Strategy (**see Appendix 1**) identifies seven objectives focussing around landscape and townscape, biodiversity, sustainable travel, outdoor sport, recreation, play and education, productivity, climate change and management and maintenance which will be implemented over the Strategy's lifetime. 23 priority actions have been identified to help deliver these objectives. These can either be delivered through other strategies (of the Council or other organisations), or through specific projects identified around the Borough (see paragraphs 19-21).
16. Reflecting Darlington's existing, distinctive pattern of green infrastructure, and to address a key national, sub regional and local policy objective to improve connectivity for people and wildlife, delivery will be undertaken on a green corridor by corridor basis and for the rural area. These include the four sub regional, strategic green corridors identified in the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy in Darlington as well as eight smaller local green corridors, identified because of their scale as well as their current and potential ability to connect a range of multi-functional spaces for sport, recreation, play, nature, movement and amenity. Some corridors already exist, e.g. the River Tees, while others, for example along the A66, will be created by 2026.
  - (a) **Strategic green corridors:** (the numbering is not consecutive, reflecting the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy):
    - 1 River Tees Corridor
    - 3 River Skerne Corridor
    - 4 River Skerne Corridor To Faverdale
    - 5 Darlington, Middleton St. George, A66/A67 Corridor to Stockton
  - (b) **Local green corridors**
    - A Former Barnard Castle Trackbed
    - B Cocker Beck
    - C West Beck
    - D Baydale Beck
    - E Salters Lane
    - F Nunnersy Lane Cemetery Lane
    - G Central Park Corridor
    - H A66 Corridor
  - (c) **Rural area** includes all other green infrastructure outside the urban area.

## **Darlington Green Infrastructure Action Plan**

17. The accompanying Action Plan (**see Appendix 2**) sets out the benefits and opportunities that each of the Strategy's objectives brings (or can bring) to Darlington. For each, several priority actions have been identified, with associated projects that will help deliver them. Projects have been prioritised to those that deliver meaningful works and/or deliver more than one action and/or objective to maximise the benefits to the community, wildlife and the environment. This is a living document; as projects progress and the components become more detailed, priorities can be added, or removed annually on completion.
18. Identification of a priority action and project, supported by robust evidence in these documents, will also ensure that for the first time, partners such as Groundwork and the Tees Valley Local Nature Partnership are aware of relevant projects in Darlington where funding could be used should it become available. This approach will also help co-ordinate funding for green infrastructure from different sources, including, where appropriate, from planning obligations secured from new development, to help deliver projects in a more timely fashion.

## **A Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure**

19. Additionally, a new Guide to Darlington's Green Infrastructure (**see Appendix 3**) will accompany the finalised Strategy and Action Plan. This will set out the vision for each green corridor, including its key landscape and biodiversity characteristics as well as existing strengths and opportunities. A map reflecting this will accompany each corridor (an example map for the River Tees Corridor is included in **Appendix 3**). This 'living' Guide will be an important tool for those involved in promoting green infrastructure in the Borough – identifying key green infrastructure issues important in that local area at an early stage will ensure proposals can be designed to deliver priority actions, ensuring that valuable resources are not replicated.

## **Delivery**

20. While an ambitious Strategy, it is realistic in terms of delivery. The documents are designed to be flexible; priority actions and projects can be delivered in stages so as to respond to the availability of funding and other resources. Several projects are underway; these have funding secured, works taking place or where funding bids have been submitted. Medium and long term projects (from 2016 onwards) have either just reached concept stage or are expected to come forward through new development identified in the forthcoming Making and Growing Places document (Cabinet 4 June 2013 C171 (3)). Different components of a project may also have different timescales for delivery reflecting their reliance on another component taking place first. A detailed monitoring framework is currently being prepared - it will set out specifications for each project including funding details and timescales for delivery.

21. The Action Plan also identifies the organisation(s) best placed to deliver each green infrastructure project. Lead partners and key partners are identified, and are expected to change over the lifetime of the project. While the Council may be the lead partner at conception, bringing all the right organisations together at the right time, other partners including community groups or organisations who have a better chance of securing funding, will take the lead when delivery, management and maintenance is required
22. A key delivery priority is to establish cost effective management and maintenance in the long term. About 70% of Darlington's public space, trees and grass verges are managed and maintained by the Council, a lot more per resident than our neighbours. But the Council does not have a statutory duty to maintain the majority of them. At a time when maintenance costs are increasing (£2m for Council owned space in 2012/2013) and Government funding to the Council has been significantly reduced, alternative ways of managing and maintaining open space in a more cost effective way is important.
23. The more 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. Darlington already has an enthusiastic and dedicated network of Friends Groups, allotment associations and community associations that help look after about 30 parks, Local Nature Reserves, allotments, bowling greens and other greenspaces - on average, volunteers in the Borough provide the equivalent of three full-time members of staff each year.
24. There is growing recognition nationally that the community should take on a more formal management role in future. A key priority in the Action Plan is to establish a framework of policies and procedures so that self-management of appropriate spaces can be achieved in a cost effective way to the Council while ensuring quality and visitor safety are not affected. In the short term the 'handover' of two sites, either by lease, licence or service level agreement, will be piloted with well-established Friends Groups, and then rolled out in the medium term to other 'Friends Group' sites across the Borough.
25. One approach will not fit all sites – other approaches identified in the Action Plan to reduce the cost to the Council (staff and financial resources) of management and maintenance of existing opens space includes:
  - (a) Leasing/licencing spaces to Friends/Community groups with the Council only retaining limited maintenance responsibilities e.g. refuse collection;
  - (b) Establishing community gardens in housing areas with a high proportion of amenity greenspace, under management agreements with tenant boards or community associations;
  - (c) Building on the success of the new wildflower meadows initiative (where 25ha of larger greenspaces e.g. Rockwell LNR, need to be cut less frequently), other spaces (or parts of) will be transferred to the programme. Ultimately as the quality improves the meadows will begin to naturally

manage themselves, requiring fewer or no cuts a year.

- (d) Leasing/licencing spaces to Friends/Community groups with full management responsibilities, in partnership with specialist organisations e.g. Durham Wildlife Trust;
  - (e) Establishing Friends Groups for all wildflower meadows initiatives, e.g. Cocker Beck, so that they can take over management responsibilities;
26. For these approaches to be successful, the Strategy recognises that site management plans are essential - they ensure that the vision for a site is jointly 'owned' by all partners, a key requirement for any funding body. To ensure that each space is managed to the same quality, a standard plan will be used, but the level of detail will vary according to the size, issues and improvements identified at each space. The role of the Darlington Green Spaces Forum will be revised to provide a 'one stop shop' where Friends Groups can exchange good practice and discuss issues of concern.
27. Maintenance of new green space provided by new developments can also be a complex issue. The Action Plan continues to ensure that a levy will be secured from each home/business in each significant new development e.g. Central Park, to be used by a management company, in partnership with residents and the Council, in accordance with a management plan. This provision will include the space itself, trees and sustainable drainage. Smaller developments will make a financial contribution towards the upkeep of any space provided.
28. It is also important that green spaces, particularly parks and Local Nature Reserves, maximise opportunities to secure revenue to help supplement maintenance costs. The Action Plan prioritises the expansion of the sponsorship scheme from roundabouts to key features in parks or large green spaces, and widening the charging schedule for educational visits from South Park to include other parks and Local Nature Reserves.
29. But funding from external organisations e.g. grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund will continue to be essential for delivery. Community groups in Darlington have a long history of successfully securing funding e.g. grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund have significantly improved Brinkburn Denes - the Strategy emphasises the essential role community and residents groups will continue to have in the future in securing new sources of grant income unavailable to the Council. As such, these documents have an important role; they are designed to raise the profile of green infrastructure issues, priorities and key projects in the Borough to ensure that Darlington is best placed to bid for external funding should it become available.

### **Community and Stakeholder Consultation Undertaken**

30. Community and other stakeholder consultations were undertaken for the draft Strategy and its accompanying Action Plan between 5 September-3 October 2012. It was widely publicised in the local media and letters were sent to 520 interested organisations, agencies and residents providing information about the documents.



Published information included the documents themselves, a publicity leaflet, the Equalities Impact Assessment and the Disability Equalities Impact Assessment. All these documents were available on a dedicated page about the draft Strategy on the Council's website.

31. Several individual meetings and discussions were held with different stakeholders, including Groundwork, Friends Groups and community organisations, relating to specific themes and initiatives. In addition six consultation events were held: at the Dolphin Centre (three), the Community Carnival, the Town Centre Consultation Event and a Young Peoples Forum. A Members' briefing was also held at the Council's Place Scrutiny Committee before the start of the consultation.
32. Thirty one responses were received as well as an extensive range of verbal responses at the events, a good response for a document of this type. A summary of comments made, the officer response and any proposed changes to the draft Strategy and Action Plan, including changes made as a result of the Equalities Impact Assessment and Disabilities Equalities Impact Assessment, are set out on the Council's website ([www.darlington.gov.uk/planningpolicy](http://www.darlington.gov.uk/planningpolicy)).
33. Whilst consultations of this type tend to attract comments expressing a variety of views about the Council's approach, overall the draft Strategy and Action Plan were very well received, particularly by key partner organisations:
  - (a) Tees Valley Local Nature Partnership: 'this Strategy will enhance the excellent work that has already been undertaken to integrate nature conservation and the natural environment and will open up opportunities for access and improve health and wellbeing in Darlington'
  - (b) Natural England: welcomed the clear, easily understandable approach, particularly the way national and sub-regional policy has been translated into local actions;
  - (c) Groundwork: welcomed the way the key themes have been broken down into area specific action plans as the local step in implementing the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy. Considered the priority actions would help promote Darlington's case to secure funding when it becomes available;
  - (d) Environment Agency: endorsed the positive approach to creating green infrastructure alongside water bodies to provide flood storage and help wildlife adapt to climate change;
  - (e) Darlington Committee of the Campaign to Protect Rural England: 'the Strategy provides a sound basis for the development of Darlington's green infrastructure in the urban area and countryside'.

**Given the range of issues on which comments were made, only the key changes are covered in this report:**

- (f) *Mitigating the impact of climate change: the draft Strategy identified green infrastructure as an important tool to manage flood risk, keep the urban area cool and help prevent species loss as the climate changes. However Groundwork suggested that more up to date guidance (e.g. an 'assessment of the impact of climate change on the natural environment of the Tees Valley') could provide local justification for this part of the Strategy. As a result more Borough specific issues have been identified, for example, the decrease in some rare species e.g. reedbeds, are more likely as temperatures change. This has helped inform the priority actions and associated projects identified for this theme in the finalised Action Plan;*
- (g) *Generating Productive Landscapes: 80% of the Borough is a working, productive landscape, and as such is an important part of the Strategy. Farmers suggested that the draft Strategy could better reflect the issues facing the mainstream agricultural industry and the wider agricultural supply chain. To address concerns, further dialogue has taken place with the agricultural sector to ensure that their concerns were addressed in the right way. As a result this theme has been revisited and more Darlington specific issues and opportunities have been identified including; establishing a more joined up and collaborative supply chain; between farmers and those they are selling to, between retailers, the food service sector and between farm businesses themselves. The Darlington Economic Strategy has been identified as the appropriate mechanism to develop these matters further*
- (h) *Project selection: respondents were concerned that some spaces, for example Drinkfield Local Nature Reserve had not been identified in the draft Action Plan. At the time of writing, a project was not planned for these spaces. But as a living document new projects can be added annually; those identified since the draft was published, for example The Banks at Middleton One Row have been added to the finalised document, while completed projects such as Brinkburn Denes have been removed. This approach has been clarified in the finalised documents.*
- (i) *Green Infrastructure Delivery: the Tees Valley Local Nature Partnership and Natural England suggested that more details should be provided on how organisations, other than the Council could help deliver the Action Plan, particularly for management and maintenance. The finalised documents clearly set out how delivery will take place; all organisations involved in delivery are identified as lead or key partners and links to their strategies are also identified, where relevant.*

## **Equalities Impact Assessment (EQA) and Disabilities Equalities Impact Assessment (DEIA)**

34. A generic EQA found that equality was being promoted by the draft Strategy. Specifically, it recognised that the type of green infrastructure varies by geographical area and providing new or improving greenspaces will help ensure more equal provision across the Borough, regardless of where someone lives. The draft Strategy could also benefit specific age groups in different ways; projects that improve the surfaces of paths could benefit older people more, whereas providing adventurous play areas could benefit younger people more
35. A DEIA has also been carried out to specifically look at the impact of the draft Strategy on disabled people. Specific measures including replacing stiles with kissing gates at popular locations along the Teesdale Way and ensuring the design and re-design of greenspaces provides equality of access for all will generate positive impacts for those with disabilities.
36. None of the proposed changes made to the draft Strategy are considered to impact specifically on the areas identified in the EQA and DEIA

### **Monitoring and Review**

37. A monitoring framework is currently being prepared, and will be an appendix to the Strategy, so that partners can see how its objectives, priority actions and projects are being delivered. A project review will be undertaken each April. This will involve Council services, other partners including Parish Councils, Friends Groups, allotment associations and community groups, where appropriate. Ongoing discussions with developers active in the area will help identify their infrastructure requirements, particularly through the preparation of the Making and Growing Places document.
38. An annual report (for the financial year) will be published at the Council's Place Scrutiny Committee providing further details including which projects (or parts of) have been completed, how much funding has been spent and the source of that funding as well as planned provision for the following year. Updates to the Green Infrastructure Action Plan and Green Infrastructure Guide will also be highlighted.

### **Financial Implications**

39. At a time when maintenance costs are increasing (£2m for Council owned space in 2012/2013) and Government funding to the Council and our partners is being significantly reduced, the Strategy and Action Plan identify a range of mechanisms (see paragraphs 24-31) to reduce the financial and staff costs of open space management and maintenance to the Council in the short and long term.

## **Legal Implications**

40. This report and the Strategy are fully compliant with the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, Town and Country Planning (Local Planning)(England) Regulations 2012 and the Localism Act 2011.

## **Corporate Landlord Advice**

41. The Property Asset Management Team has provided specific details, set out in paragraphs 24-25, relating to the approach to be taken for the 'handover' of sites to community groups.

## **Procurement Advice**

42. There are no Procurement implications associated with this report.

## **Equalities Considerations**

43. This report has been prepared in consideration of the Equalities Impact Assessment requirement referred to in paragraphs 37-39.

## **Consultation**

44. None required.