

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

Wansbeck Riparian Corridor Improvements

Project Lead

Company/ Organisation	Named Lead	Position
Groundwork North East & Cumbria	Hellen Hornby	Programme Development Manager

Bluespaces Improved

Year	Claimed	Proposed	Reason For Any Change
Year 4	4.7 km	4.7 km	NA

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	September 2023	N/A	N/A
Water Environment Steering Group (Internal)	October 2023	October 2023	N/A
Water Environment Governance Group (External)	October 2023	October 2023	May 2024

Project Timescales

Candidate Project Approved	Project Initiated	Project Completed
October 2023	October 2023	March 2024

Project Summary and Highlights

Summary

Through this project initiated with NWG Bluespaces funding, Groundwork North East has worked with partners including Northumberland County Council, Ashington Town Council, Choppington Parish Council, Sandy Bay Caravan Park and Wansbeck Barrage Partnership to deliver access and recreation improvements to areas of the River Wansbeck in Northumberland, stretching from Sheepwash Weir to the mouth of the river Wansbeck, improving 4.7 km of water environment.

This project has built on the Revitalising our Estuaries programme, supported by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, to expand work along the riparian corridor, focused on key recreational areas at Butlers Wood, Sheepwash Weir, Wansbeck Riverside Park, Wansbeck Barrage and sand dunes at Sandy Bay.

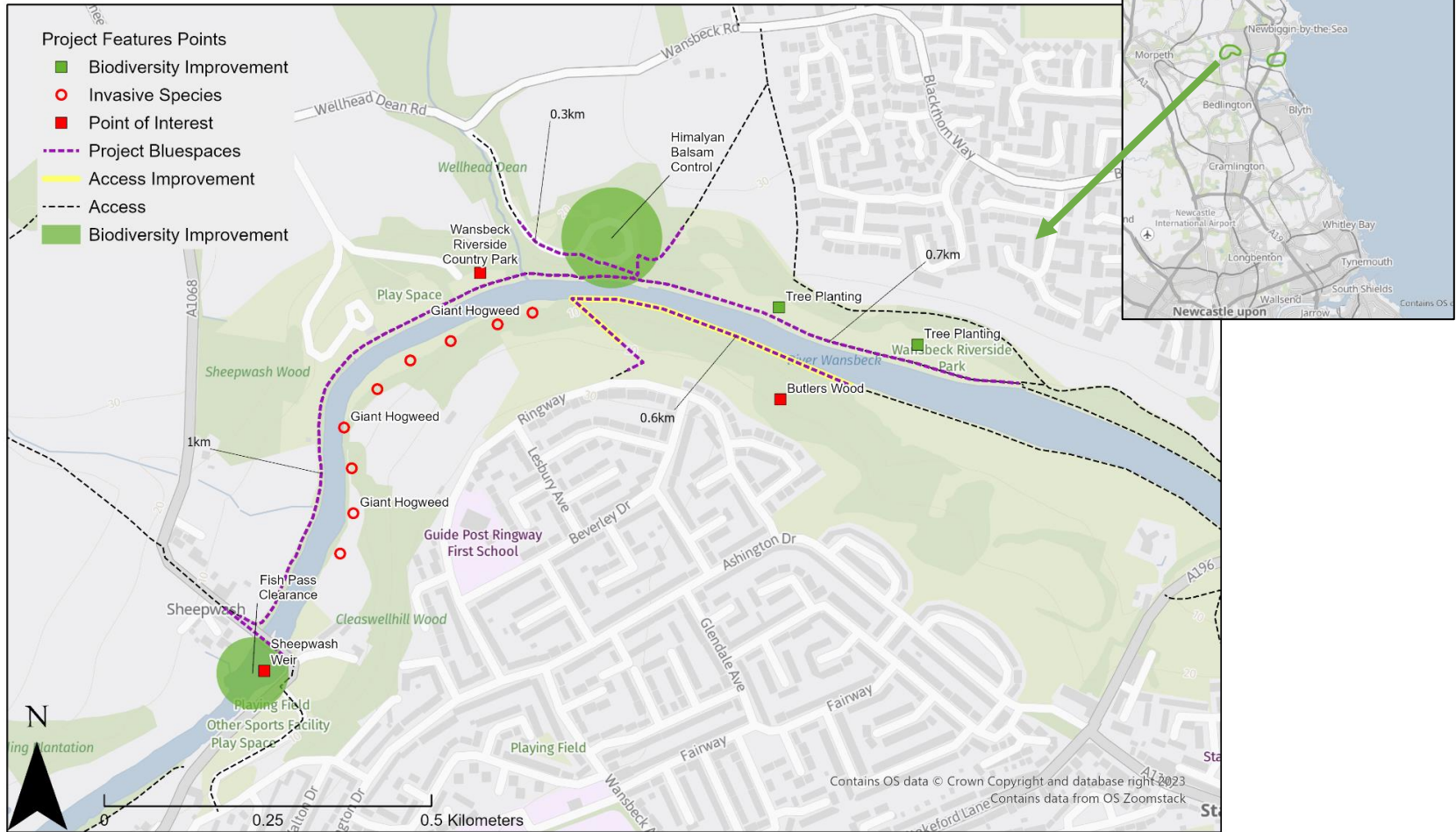
Funding to employ part time trainee Estuary Rangers and Supervisors has allowed improvements to be delivered to enhance this area and improve footpaths and access in the project area, ensuring that the water environment is attractive, open, and accessible for all. The removal of invasive plant species and encroaching scrub will allow native vegetation to recolonise the wider riparian corridor and protect priority sand dune habitat and. The proposed eel pass on the Wansbeck Barrage was not feasible to deliver in this project, but other wildlife and biodiversity improvements were identified including tree and wildflower planting and creation of lizard habitat.

Highlights

- Installation of 5 sections of boardwalk in Butlers Wood, Choppington to provide improved access to the woodland environment over wet and boggy natural paths.
- Creation of a gravel bound section of footpath and drainage over a wet and boggy area on the English Coastal Path in Sandy Bay Sand-dunes.
- Clearance of 2 fish passes on the Wansbeck estuary.
- Creation of lizard habitat on sand dunes at Sandy Bay.
- Invasive species control including Japanese and sea buckthorn on sand dunes, giant hogweed and Himalayan balsam along riverbanks.



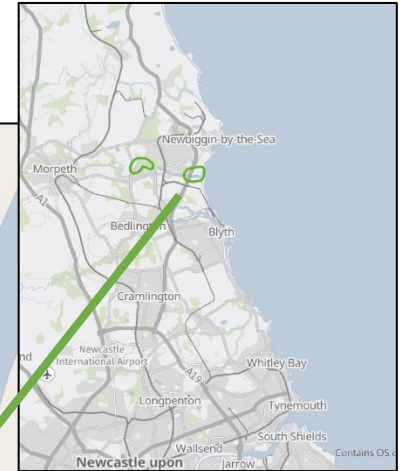
Wansbeck Riparian Corridor Improvements



Total Length of Bluespaces: 2.6 km

Overview of bluespaces and improvements in the Sheepwash Weir project area, River Wansbeck


Wansbeck Riparian Corridor Improvements



Total Length of Bluespaces: 2.1 km

Overview of bluespaces and improvements in the Wansbeck Barrage project area, River Wansbeck

Project Outputs, Benefits & Evidence Against Criteria

Access, Facilities & Recreation	
Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access to the water environment will be encouraged by maintaining, improving, and creating footpaths in Butlers Wood, Riverside Park and along the English Coastal Path. 2. The local community have better access to the riverside and more opportunities for volunteering, walking, cycling etc. benefitting both physical and mental health. Improving and creating footpaths will enable people, including those with mobility restrictions, to be more active and connect with their local blue/green space thus enhancing their physical and mental wellbeing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A1: Increases access to, engagement with and enjoyment of the water environment ➤ A2: Benefits health and wellbeing
Outputs	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Public access to the water environment of the River Wansbeck has been encouraged through improvements including: the installation of 5 sections of boardwalk in Butlers Wood, Choppington to provide improved access over wet and boggy natural paths; footpath maintenance along the riparian corridor of the Wansbeck estuary, and creation of a gravel bound section of footpath drainage over a wet and boggy area on the English Coastal Path in Sandy Bay Sand-dunes. 2. Access improvements focused on the popular recreational areas will allow the local community to connect with the local blue and green space and benefit health and wellbeing. The focus areas are in Butlers Wood, Choppington, used by walkers and birdwatchers, Wansbeck Riverside Park near Ashington also used by educational groups, and at the barrage and the estuary sand-dunes, which also benefits fishermen, canoeists, boaters and also coastal tourists, including those visiting via the England Coast Path. 	
Evidence	
	
<p>Boardwalk, Butlers Wood, Choppington.</p>	



Footpath improvements, Sandy Bay



Boardwalk under construction by trainee Wardens

Wildlife & Biodiversity

Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A new eel pass on the Wansbeck Barrage will create a viable means of eel migrating upstream. Fish pass clearance at Sheepwash Weir and on the Wansbeck Barrage, will open up over 7km of river to salmon, trout, eels and other migratory fish. 2. Continued removal of encroaching invasive species and scrub will enhance the habitat condition of Coastal sand dunes priority habitat. Improvement to neighbouring paths also aims to reduce footfall pressure on the site. 3. Continued removal of invasive species from the sand-dunes and riparian corridors, including Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam, giant hogweed and Japanese rose, will enable native vegetation to recolonise the riparian corridor. 	<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)

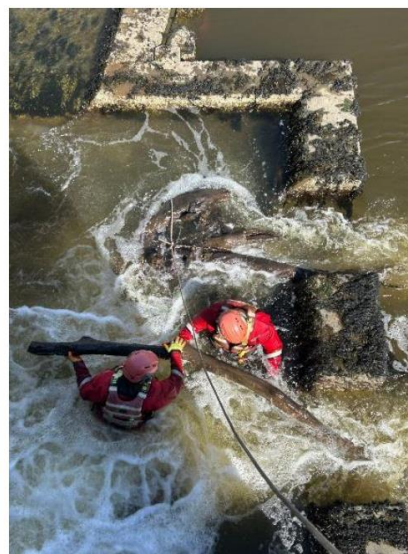
Outputs

1. After further guidance and advice from the Environment Agency, Groundwork was advised that an eel pass easement on the barrage structure would not meet regulatory requirements, and with future changes in the pipeline for altering the structure, that any investment at this time could be misspent.

Two fish passes were cleared on the Wansbeck estuary, which had blocked following build-up of debris over winter storms.

Further habitat improvements were also delivered through tree and wildflower planting at Riverside Park, and the creation of lizard habitat on sand dunes at Sandy Bay.
2. The Coastal sand dunes priority habitat has been improved through a reduction of sea buckthorn, and path improvements (evidenced above) have helped to encourage visitors onto the designated paths and away from the dune habitat.
3. Himalayan balsam has been pulled in Ashington Riverside Park, Japanese knotweed has been treated in the sand dunes at Sandy Bay, and giant hogweed is due to be treated in May 2024 on the south riverbank between Sheepwash Weir and Choppington (EA license available on request). Removal of invasive non-native Japanese rose has been undertaken along the English Coastal Path and on the sand dunes.

Evidence



Fish pass clearance on the Wansbeck Barrage by Swiftwater Solutions



Japanese rose and sea buckthorn removal in Sandy Bay sand dunes



Japanese Knotweed treatment at Sandy Bay Himalayan Balsam removal at Wansbeck Riverside Park



Tree and wildflower planting at Ashington/Wansbeck Riverside Park

Trees planted: Silver Birch, Down Birch, Hazel, Oak, Whitebeam, Rowan, Small Leaved Lime

Wildflowers planted (plug plants): kidney vetch, greater knapweed, wild carrot, lady's bedstraw, meadow cranesbill, common St. John's Wort, field scabious, birds foot trefoil, ribwort plantain, self heal, salad burnet, white campion, tufted vetch, common agrimony, garlic mustard, common knapweed, wild foxglove, hedge woundwort, upright hedge parsley, dark mullein, English bluebell, wild primrose, red campion, betony, wood sage, upright hedge parsley.

Water Quality

Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<p>1. The Estuary Rangers and Supervisor will be able to remove potential sources of pollution from fly-tipping and littering that could enter the watercourse. Disposing of this through the Local Authorities Neighbourhood Services. Removal of fly-tipping and littering will also improve the visual appearance of the water environment and make it more attractive to residents, user groups and tourists.</p>	<p>➤ C3: Improves state and function of water, including naturalisation, visual appearance, litter and odour</p>

Outputs

<p>1. Rangers and their supervisor employed through project funds have removed litter, fly-tipping and debris from the across riparian corridor of the Wansbeck estuary and at the coast. This has been an ongoing activity, litter has been collected by the team across 12 individual days, including at Butlers Wood, Wansbeck Riverside Park, Wansbeck Barrage and Sandy Bay.</p>

Evidence



Site operatives litter picking along the Wansbeck estuary and riparian corridor.



Litter removed from sand dunes and estuary edge



Additional & Secondary Benefits

Expected Project Outcomes	Benefits
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This project supports the local economy by securing the employment of two young people and their supervisor. Local suppliers are used for all materials and resources. Local communities benefit from improved riverside footpaths enabling safe, easy access between communities. 2. This project works in partnership with the Wansbeck Barrage Project which is seeking to improve the functionality of the Barrage to improve the water quality of the Wansbeck – a project led by Groundwork and funded by the Environment Agency. It will also contribute to the wider Revitalising our Estuaries programme of ecological improvements to river estuaries in the North East. Groundwork also delivers the Wansbeck Restoration for Climate Change project in the upper catchment enabling delivery of ecological enhancements to the whole catchment. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. D2: Provides benefits to local communities, the local economy or NWG 2. D3: Supports strategic project or investment into strategic partnership or landscape/regional activity

Outputs

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The project with its co-funding has provided part time employment for 3 young people and 2 supervisors (more staff than originally anticipated) to deliver the project outputs. Local suppliers have been used for all materials and resources, and the community has benefitted from improved access and improvements to wildlife and biodiversity as well as reduced litter in the water environment. 2. Associated work in this project linked to the Wansbeck Barrage Project and Revitalising our Estuaries programme has identified that here is potential to improve access for river users to a wider area of the Wansbeck estuary. Linked activities include new timelapse photography of the estuary showing siltation of estuary upstream of the barrage, modelling of silt and sediment in the estuary by JBA consultants, and work to trial the effectiveness of lock gate opening at flushing sediment through from the upper estuary, which will all inform future management actions.

Evidence



Trainee wardens at work with a supervisor



Still from Wansbeck Barrage timelapse photography

Customer Testimonies & Media

We have had a lot of really positive feedback and interactions with the public whilst working on this project. Whilst litter picking and carrying out path maintenance works, we had at least 5 comments from members of the public saying that they feel relieved that there were people removing litter from such a lovely environment so that they could process to enjoy it. When removing sea buckthorn, 2 members of the public expressed an interest in why we were removing the buckthorn and then reminisced on when they used to come to the Wansbeck 20 years ago when the buckthorn looked less overgrown and more controlled on the dunes. A man fishing on the Wansbeck asked us what we were doing and why, giving us the opportunity to educate him about invasive species such as Himalayan balsam and why we were removing it. An elderly couple walked past Kristof and I when we were pruning a hedge that was encroaching on a walkway, and they said we were doing a grand job, and we had a lovely chat about birdsong and the use of the app 'merlin' with a man who came out on the Wansbeck every day with his dog.

The project has also given my colleagues and I the opportunity to develop new skills. We now have a wider understanding on the spread of invasive species, the importance of maintaining an environmentally healthy environment for the local community, we have developed our team working skills carrying out practical habitat management work, and gained experience engaging with the public in a respectful way, using their local knowledge to effectively benefit the project, hence allowing their interest to be incorporated into our work.

Isa Almond, Habitat Monitoring Officer and project ranger, Groundwork

All of the water users support the application for funding to replace the weir gates (through Revitalising our Estuaries) so that the gates can be opened on a more regular basis to help with the tidal flush to both restore the ecology of the river and to help with the silt removal, although we understand that this is only part of the solution for the silt removal, this may include the physical removal of the silt to restore the river flow, along with the removal of the trees and other debris which we understand speeds the silting up process up by trapping the silt.

Alan Fairholme – Wansbeck River Users Group

Lead Partner Quotes & Testimonials

Although we haven't been able to complete the works around the creation of an eel pass due to external investigations in to the Barrage structure and function we were able to focus more on the invasive species and treat a broad range of invasive species that are negatively impacting locally on biodiversity. We've also worked closely with the County and Parish Councils to deliver these improvements and secure additional match funding which has contributed to the overall improvements in the area.

Hellen Hornby, Programme Development Manager, Groundwork

This project will not only enable Groundwork, stakeholders and local communities to contribute to protecting and restoring natural heritage at risk, but also builds on their unique approach to create green jobs and support those furthest from the job market to gain employment and build skills. We are also excited to have the opportunity for wider community engagement, celebrating the rich and diverse cultural, maritime and industrial heritage associated with the estuaries of Northeastern England.

Neil Dawson , Green Spaces Manager, Northumberland County Council

Ashington Town Council is pleased to be involved in this project and believes participants will benefit from training, educational, and volunteering experiences, enabling them to have a better understanding and connection to our local area. Without Revitalising our Estuaries local residents would be limited in their opportunities to learn more about the Wansbeck Estuary and the area's natural and built heritage.

Stephen Humphry – Ashington Town Council

It was lovely meeting up with you and Steve last week. Thank you for the images and thank you for the work of your team. We look forward to continuing to working with you on our other projects.

Angela Brindley – Parish Clerk – Choppington Parish Council

Other Supporting Evidence

- [Revitalising our Estuaries - Groundwork](#)
- Groundwork Youtube: Revitalising our Estuaries video: <https://youtu.be/59-69dC7lu0>
- Revitalising our Estuaries [Facebook](#) Page
- Wansbeck Barrage project: https://youtu.be/4FxCASldv_o