

Greenspace 1- Copt Hill, Houghton-Le-Spring

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Copt Hill is an open grassland greenspace, with scrub and regenerating woodland bounded by mature hedge and adjacent to Rough Dene. It has commanding views across the surrounding landscape, looking west across to the Durham Dales and north towards Penshaw Monument. The circle of six beech trees, known as The Seven Sisters, is a local landmark. It identifies the location of an ancient burial mound which is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM).

1.2 There are a number of benches across Copt Hill with an information board about the Burial Mound at the entrance. The Stephenson Trail, a long-distance walk into the centre of Sunderland using the route of the Hetton Colliery Railway, runs alongside the edge of Copt Hill. There are a few well-used routes around Copt Hill with a central path, which rises steeply from the adjacent cycleway network.



2.0 Location and Accessibility

2.1 Copt Hill lies between Hetton-le-Hole and Houghton-le-Spring. The greenspace is bounded by a golf course to the east, farmland, woodland and public house to the north and housing to the west. To the south lies Rough Dene Burn Local Wildlife Site (LWS), which flows along the southern edge of the greenspace, just outside the site boundary, providing a steep sided wooded valley.

3.0 Greenspace Context

3.1 There are four statutory designated sites within 2Km of Copt Hill with a further 9 non-statutory sites:

- Hetton Bogs LNR
- Hetton Park LWS
- Hetton Bogs West LWS
- Hetton Bogs SSSI
- Rough Dene LWS
- Hetton Lyons LWS
- Eppleton Quarry LWS
- Eppleton Grassland and Railway SSSI
- Copt Hill LWS
- High Haining Hill SSSI.
- The Clouds
- Houghton Hill Cut and Scarp
- Warden Law Quarry

4.0 Strategic Significance

4.1 The greenspace is not designated as a protected wildlife site, though it lies between two LWS at its northern and southern boundaries. It also lies within a wildlife corridor and is protected from development as greenspace and as a Settlement Break in the city's Local plan, the Sunderland Core Strategy. Overall, the greenspace has strong strategic significance and so all habitats recorded have been included within the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Metrics Calculator as "formally identified within

local strategy.” The area of calcareous grassland (Magnesian Limestone grassland) is of very high significance.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Durham Wildlife Services (DWS) were commissioned to carry out an ecological appraisal of Copt Hill in May 2022. The methodology was carried out as three main steps as set out below:

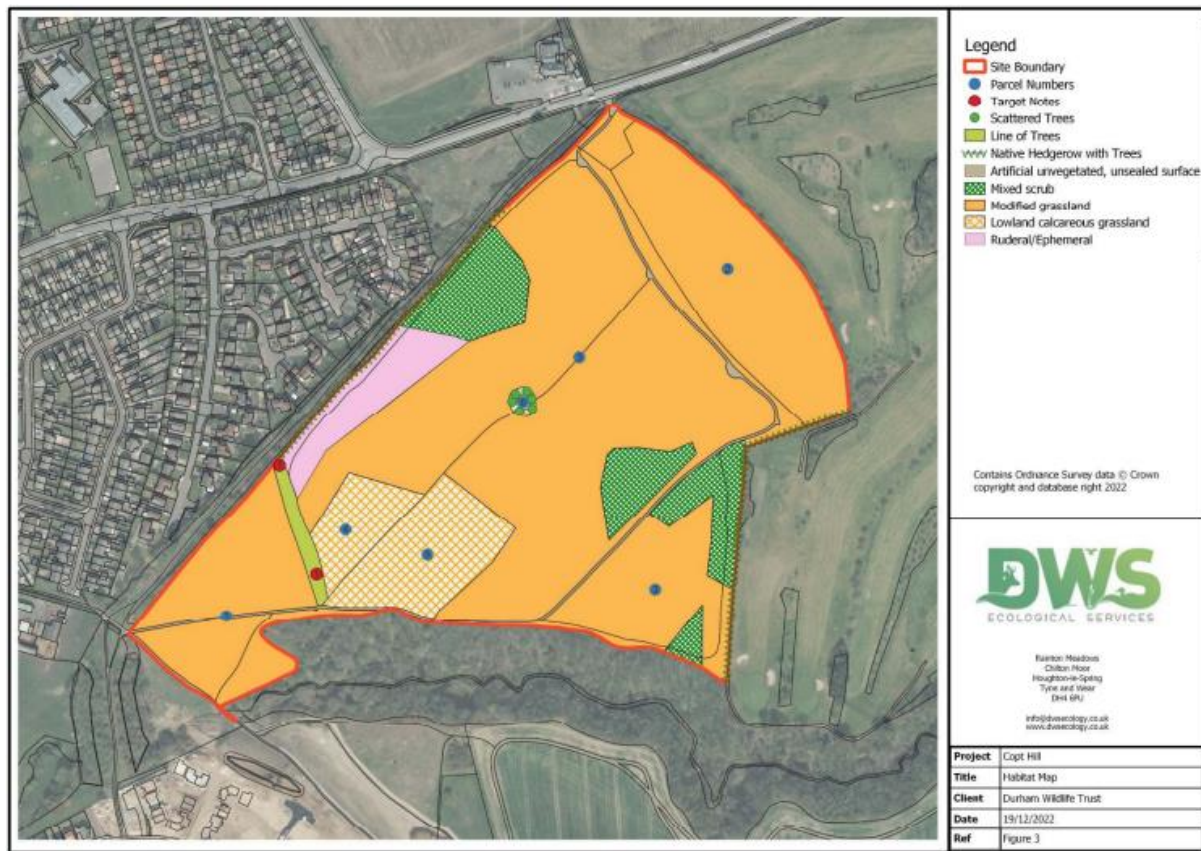
- An Ecological Assessment;
- Protected Species and Other Species of Nature Conservation Importance;
- Controlled Invasive Species.

6.0 Habitat Assessment

6.1 The habitat types found in Copt Hill are set out below.

Habitats	Conditions
<p>Urban – urban tree The Seven Sisters, a circle of beech trees, are situated at the top of a mound in the centre of the greenspace. Vegetation beneath is calcareous grassland. The trees are all beech, <i>Fagus sylvatica</i>. However, only 6 of the 7 sisters remain.</p>	Good
<p>Sparsely vegetated - Ruderal/Ephemeral Several dense stands of tall ruderal vegetation are present towards the western edge of the greenspace. Rosebay willow herb is dominant. Additional pockets of tall ruderal are present elsewhere but are recorded as negative indicator species within the metrics.</p>	Poor
<p>Grasslands Modified The vast majority of the greenspace is comprised of rank species poor grassland. To the far west the grassland was being grazed by tethered horses, with a resulting mixed sward height.</p> <p>Scrub is a large problem throughout the greenspace, with large amounts of self-seeded ash, hawthorn, and willow <i>Salix</i> spp. Bracken is present to the southeast, and large amounts of rosebay willowherb throughout. The main central section of the greenspace is more diverse with some indicator species present, but these are very rare in the sward and this large area of grassland comprises almost exclusively of rank grasses and undesirable herbs.</p> <p>Modified grassland uses the low distinctiveness grassland condition assessment. This habitat has been assessed as being in poor condition for the areas of horse grazed grassland, and moderate condition for other areas.</p>	Poor/Moderate
<p>Grassland Lowland calcareous A large pocket of grassland in the centre of the greenspace, on the southwest slope, is species rich calcareous grassland (Magnesian Limestone grassland).</p> <p>A large number of neutral indicators are still present, with common knapweed, oxeye daisy, and yellow rattle. However, the frequency of calcareous indicators has increased, particularly lady’s bedstraw, kidney vetch, fairy flax and small scabious. Management has taken place across this area including spreading of green hay and it is evident that this has been successful.</p> <p>Area 1: East of the path is of high quality, being the area more established.</p>	Good except around 7 sisters due to footfall

<p>Area 2: West of the path is the area newly diversified and is still doing well.</p> <p>Area 3: Small area of calcareous grassland exists on the small mound on which the Seven Sisters stand. This is the only area where greater knapweed was found. A large amount of bare ground from footfall limits the number of species present.</p>	
<p>Heathland and shrub – mixed shrub</p> <p>Scrub is scattered across the greenspace, with majority hawthorn, self-seeded ash and willow. These scattered trees have been recorded as negative indicators within the grassland condition assessments. Denser areas have developed to the northwest and southeast. These areas are also willow, hawthorn and ash dominated, as well as Swedish whitebeam and silver birch. These areas are self-seeded over the grassland and are immature.</p>	Moderate
<p>Species Poor Hedgerow with trees</p> <p>Overgrown hawthorn hedgerows with trees border the greenspace to the east and northwest. The northwest is more diverse with osier willow, dogrose, blackthorn, hazel, ash, cherry and sycamore all recorded.</p> <p>Ground flora is poor, with mugwort, rosebay willowherb, cleavers and nettle. Bracken is present along the eastern hedgerow.</p>	Moderate
<p>Line of Trees</p> <p>A line of mature/ veteran trees are present to the west of the greenspace. These are likely to be a former hedgerow with trees, with some hawthorn understorey still present. However, ash, oak and sycamore trees dominate with a small number having decay and/or rot holes providing bat/bird potential.</p>	Moderate



7.0 Protected Species and Species of Nature Conservation Importance

Breeding and wintering birds

7.1 The Environment Records Information Centre (ERIC) found 41 records are for the greenspace itself. These records include red list cuckoo, yellowhammer, grasshopper warbler, tree sparrow, grey partridge and willow tit and Schedule 1 peregrine falcon, crossbill, osprey, fieldfare and barn owl. During the survey in summer 2022, woodpigeon, swifts, collared doves, magpie, yellowhammer, bullfinch, blue tit and common whitethroat were all recorded. Since visiting the greenspace, various woodland birds have been noted including blue tit, coal tit, robin, blackbird and sparrow using the areas of scrub and boundary hedges.

Bats

7.2 Bat records were noted from within 2Km. None of these records are from within the site itself, with the nearest record approximately 500 metres away.

Badger

7.3 No evidence of badger.

Western European Hedgehog

7.4 No records found for the greenspace itself, however the greenspace provides good habitat for this species, and they are highly likely to be present.

Invertebrates

7.5 Two records lie within the greenspace itself, with both red list and Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act species wall and small heath butterflies. The greenspace has potential for rare and threatened invertebrates because of the species rich grassland and mature/veteran trees on greenspace.

8.0 Existing Management and Maintenance

Copt Hill is an important countryside site and local amenity. SCC manage Copt Hill with low intensity grazing by cattle to maintain areas of grassland. The adjacent footpath is a right of way and managed by the Highways Team. Environment Services empty the bins next to the picnic benches.

SCC's Area Committee have committed funding, prior to the commencement of Link Together, to improve entrances through vegetation management, re-surfacing around seating, repainting seating and designing and installing new interpretive signage. This will compliment and support the delivery of Link Together and maintain community interest in Copt Hill. There is a huge council commitment to improve Copt Hill.

9.0 General description and observations

9.1 Copt Hill is an open grassland greenspace, which rises steeply up from the Rough Dene. The grassland varies in quality due to encroachment from scrub and woodland regrowth, ruderal species and rank grasses. The southern area of grassland is Magnesian Limestone grassland and is good quality. It is important to maintain that quality and prevent deteriorations due to encroachment from scrub. However, the combination of scrub, overgrown hedges and regenerating woodland does provide good habitat for birds. Therefore, it is important to maintain a good balance between controlling the scrub and keeping areas of open grassland.

Access and Interpretation

9.2 There are a number of informal routes around Copt Hill and the Stephenson's Trail runs alongside the greenspace. The open nature and location of various benches could encourage long distance walkers to stop off and enjoy the views as well as local walkers. There is one major north south route, which rises steeply. There is a more informal circular route around the edge of Copt Hill. The path is narrow in places and should be widened with scrub cut-back to help create a circular walk.

10.0 Summary of Constraints and Key Issues

Issue	Comment
Planning Policy	Proposals support local policy, enhancing the existing greenspace, Settlement Break and wildlife corridor and respecting the historic setting of the SAM.
Climate Change and Health	Proposals will support further opportunities for carbon sequestration. Area of deprivation nearby- greenspace enhancement will support area in general.
Greenspace	Area is low in greenspace quantity and quality and has lower woodland cover. Proposals will reduce deficiencies.
Biodiversity	Proposals will further support stepping stone connectivity within wildlife corridor and improve overall biodiversity.
Invasive Species	None on site.
Landscape Character	Area of higher landscape value. Longer distance views from Magnesian Limestone Escarpment will be protected and local landscape will be improved.
Historic Environment	The Scheduled Ancient Monument (and its setting) will be protected and enhanced by proposals and where possible, improvements to

	the adjacent alignment of Hetton Colliery Railway will be enhanced. Site interpretation to be enhanced.
Water Environment	Lies within a Source Protection Zone – proposals will not negatively impact on this.
Rights of Way / Access	Informal footpaths exist on site. These routes (and access points) will be improved. Signing and seating also to be improved.
Soil and Nitrates	No negative impact on soils. No nitrate fertilisers will be used as site lies within Nitrate Vulnerable Zone.
Utilities	Regional Transmission High Pressure Gas Pipe runs diagonally through the site. Any planting will avoid easements relating to this pipeline.

11.0 Proposed Works

The locations of the proposed works are shown in the map below.

11.1 Habitat management aims at Copt Hill:

- Maintain and enhance Magnesian Limestone grassland by ensuring appropriate management continues and encroaching scrub is managed.
- Improve quality of other areas of grassland by planning a programme of scrub management to maintain open areas, putting in place suitable grazing or mowing regime
- To increase continuity of hedgerows through new planting.

11.2 Access and Interpretation

- To improve informal routes by removing encroaching scrub;
- To repair sections of footpath which have been washed away and improve cross drains to reduce recurrence.
- Consider opportunities for signing upgrades to add value understanding and connection to the visitor experience, of the sites walks, historic setting, local landscape and biodiversity.

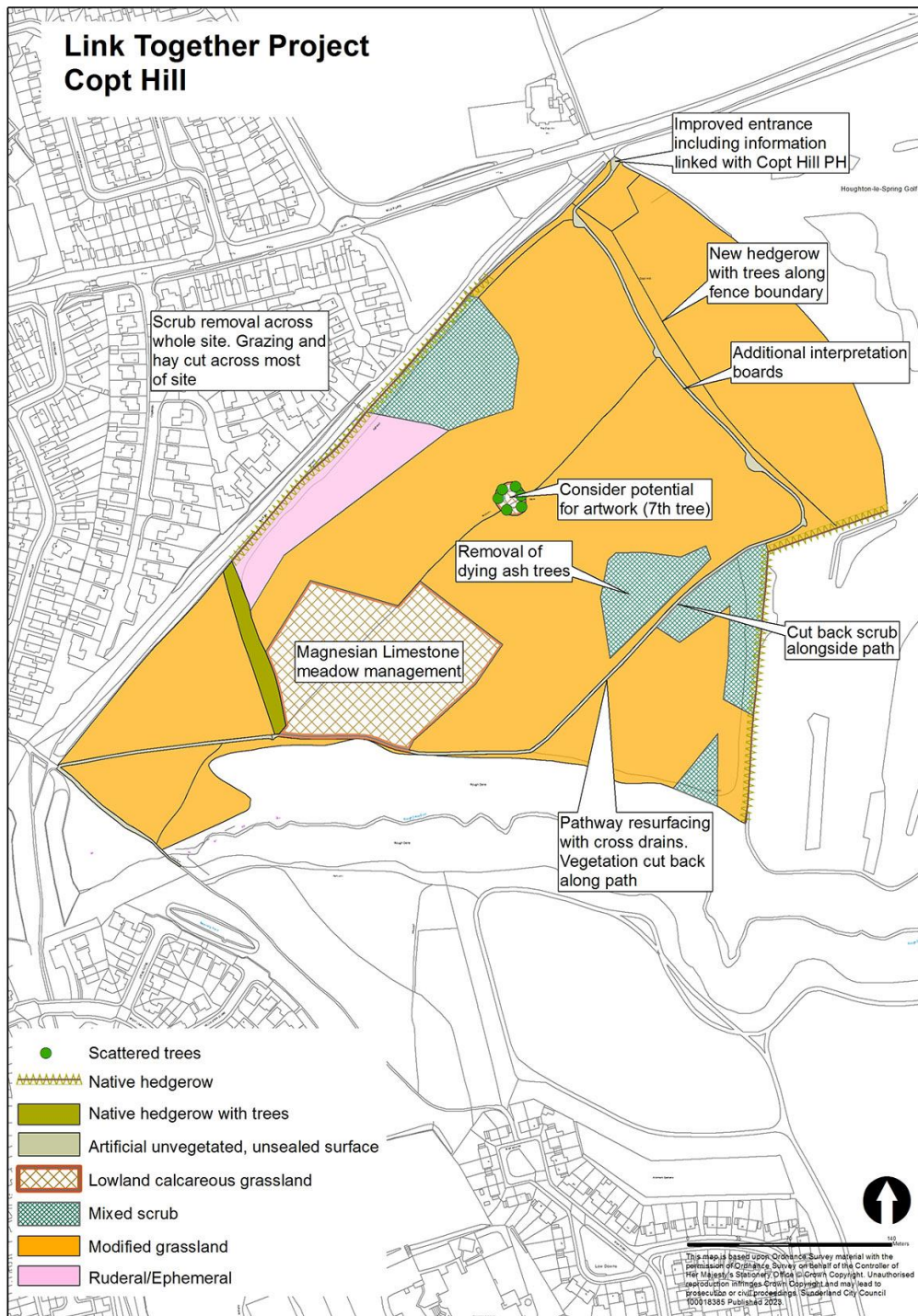
For details of the specifications for project delivery, please refer to the

12.0 Copt Hill Budget

Source of Funding	Amount (£)
Section 106	27,387
Area Committee	0
NECF	6,945
NLHF	18,251
Total	52,583

Habitat	Project	Month Completed	Budget (£)
Grassland Calcareous	Cutting or scything the grassland to remove arising	August/September	2,250
	Spreading of green hay across the site to spread seed more widely	August/September	3,478

Scrub Management	Define programme of scrub management across the greenspace to control scrub encroaching grassland and remove scrub	October/February	7,698
Modified Grassland	Cut grassland	August/September	3,000
New hedgerows	Plant new 270m hedge along existing fence line	October/March	5,351
	Design Fees	-	900
Footpath	Repair footpath where surface has been eroded and install cross drains	March – July	24,648
Contingency – DWT			1,825
Contingency – SCC			3,433
Total			52583



The specification for each area of work are outlined in the Specifications Link Together document and details of future maintenance and management are outlined in the Maintenance and Management Plan document.