

COMMITTEE : **ASHINGTON AND BLYTH LOCAL AREA COUNCIL**
DATE: **15TH NOVEMBER 2023**

DATE: 1ST NOVEMBER 2023

Petition seeking the continuation of staffing and activities in Hirst Park once grant funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund ceases.

Report of: Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport
Cabinet Member: Cllr C Horncastle, Looking after our Environment

1. Purpose of report

To acknowledge and respond to the petition and seek the views of the Local Area Council.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that members consider the report and note that:

a) a great deal of good work has taken place to rejuvenate Hirst Park thanks to investment in the Hirst Park Revival project by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Northumberland County Council (NCC), Ashington Town Council, Ashington Leisure Partnership and others;

b) the lifetime of the project has been extended and now runs until the end of March 2024;

c) staff employed by the Hirst Park Revival Project are now employed locally, remaining professionally linked to Hirst Park and the local community;

and

d) NCC and partner organisations will continue to support and promote events, activities and volunteering within the park as part of the on-going management arrangements for the park, as this is a key part of the legacy of the project and supports achievement of the parks 'Green Flag' status.

3. Link to Corporate Plan

This report is particularly relevant to the County Council's corporate priority of tackling inequalities.

4. Key issues

4.1. As part of the Hirst Park Revival Project, NCC have employed staff to develop and implement a wide-ranging programme of events and activities

within Hirst Park. Funding from the National Lottery heritage Fund will cease at the end of March 2024.

- 4.2. An aspiration of the Hirst Park Revival Project was to establish a Friends of Hirst Park group to support the County Council's management and maintenance of the Park and to ensure the continuation of events and activities beyond the lifetime of the supplied funding. Although the park has a number of enthusiastic volunteers and local residents, it has not been possible during the project period to establish a Friends group to meet the project's aspirations. However, this remains an aspiration that NCC will continue to pursue.
- 4.3. Whilst project staff have moved on to other jobs, a notable success of the Revival Project is that its Park Development Officer and Project Coordinator still maintain strong professional links with the park from roles within Northumberland County Council's Northumberland Communities Together Team and the Full Circle Food project, based at the Growing Zone within Hirst Park.
- 4.4. Remaining project budget has been made available to Northumberland Communities Together and the Full Circle Food Project in order for them to deliver events and activities in Hirst Park until the project ends in March 2024.
- 4.5. The management and maintenance of the park continues, care of the County Council's Countryside and Green Spaces Team and Neighbourhood Services NEAT staff. Under a memorandum of understanding agreement, Ashington Town Council also makes an annual financial contribution towards additional management and maintenance in the park to provide an enhanced offer to park users.

5. Background

- 5.1. The Hirst Park Revival Project (2018-2023) is a £2.7 million project funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), Northumberland County Council, Ashington Town Council and Ashington Leisure Partnership. The project has delivered more than five years of investment in Hirst Park, Ashington. This has included:
 - ☑ A new play zone and splash park
 - ☑ A new Growing Zone with a new building and outdoor horticultural area, occupied by Full Circle Food Project (with office space for partners)
 - ☑ New interpretation throughout the park
 - ☑ A new community performance space and seating area on the former site of the Woodhorn monument
 - ☑ Revival of the flower garden and new planting schemes throughout the park
 - ☑ Improved natural heritage including trees and meadow areas

- ☑ A new Hirst Park Memories website where stories of the park are celebrated, and new memories can be created through activities and events
- ☑ A new Hirst Park History Group where local people can explore and research the history of the park
- ☑ A new Friends of Hirst Park Facebook group – a community of 1,600 people who are interested in the park
- ☑ A varied Activity Plan providing events, meetings and activities designed to support wellbeing and bring more people into the park
- ☑ Support for local schools and families to explore the park
- ☑ A volunteer programme providing new opportunities for local people to get active and help look after the park

5.2. As a direct result of project funding, more people are using Hirst Park for a wider range of activities. This means a greater number of people in the local community are able to access the physical, social and mental wellbeing benefits provided by their local greenspace.

5.3. Two Park Development Officers were recruited at an early stage of the project to deliver a programme of activities set out in an activity plan agreed with NLHF. More recently, the activity plan has been implemented by one of the original Park Development Officers, Carla Thompson, and a Project Coordinator (recruited in 2022), Sarah Bredin Kemp. Carla now works for the County Council's Northumberland Communities Together Team, based in the Hirst Welfare Centre. Sarah now works for the Full Circle Food Project, based in Hirst Park's Growing Zone. Both Carla and Sarah and their respective organisations are committed to improving the lives of members of the local community.

5.4. Park users have become increasingly aware of the end date for Lottery funding and concerned over the loss of dedicated staff and the impact on the lives of visitors to Hirst Park. The text of the petition is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Petition narrative

Not too long ago Hirst Park was only for bowlers, dog walkers and anti-social behaviour. That all got better thanks to funding from a Heritage Lottery bid to improve the park and make it more user friendly. The funding allowed for hiring of staff, improving the park and allowing time and space for a wide variety of activities.

Having staff and activities in the pavilion, being able to grab a coffee, sit somewhere warm and friendly has had huge benefits to the mental wellbeing of so many.

All that is about to come to an end. The funding runs out in September of 2023. Meaning the building will revert back to an unwelcoming unusable space that is only open when the bowlers are in.

We have started this petition to tell Northumberland County Council that we need things to continue in Hirst Park for the benefit of our community. No, the betterment of our community! We need a space to go, friendly helpful staff to help out or just to sit and chat to or check in with, activities provided, a meeting space we can access with ease. A friendly face or two.

The staff at Hirst Park Pavilion:

- *have provided guidance and signposting.*
- *have supported many homeless members of our community*
- *have become a go to face when you need a chat*
- *provided meaningful and fun activities, provide a space to be warm and enjoy a cup of soup during the bad weather and cost of living crisis*
- *kept us all engaged during the multiple lockdowns*
- *got us all engaged in the park and its many uses*
- *keep us informed and welcome our opinions*
- *make us feel welcome,*

We need this to continue!

The Hirst Community cannot afford to lose such an asset. Add your signature below, do not let Hirst Park Pavilion become the barren land it was just a few years ago!

As an example, we will lose:

Warm hubs, Clothes swaps, Knowledge of the area, Kids craft sessions, Access to public toilets, Holiday activities, Friendly and caring staff.

A warm place to be and socialise when we can't afford to put the heating on

Now is the time to act!! Sign below.

5.5. Over the lifetime of the Revival Project the activity plan has been revised and reformed to adapt to significant changes. The first revision, in 2021, was in response to changes in staffing, the effects of Covid 19 and changes in relationships with partners. More recently, the activity plan has been revised as project staff have left and currently describes the remaining work of the project until the end of March 2024. Details of the current plan are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of new Hirst Park Revival Project plan, Oct 2023 - Mar 2024.

Project plan:

- Formalise relationships with community partners to support community activities for and with local residents in their local greenspace
- Establish a regular programme of community activities in Hirst Park which can continue beyond the end of NLHF funding
- Improve access to the Hirst Park Pavilion as a community venue for a wider range of people
- Increase local ownership and engaging more local residents and partner agencies in managing the park through volunteering and provision of positive activities
- Improve the park's pavilion

This will be achieved by:

1. Staff support from Northumberland Communities Together
2. Continued involvement from Full Circle Food Project to support volunteers and sustain other activities
3. Continuing to provide facilities for the Health Walking group run by Community Link
4. Continued provision of consumables and other resources to support drop in warm hubs run by local volunteers and supported by Northumberland Communities Together and the Full Circle Food Project
5. Continuing to provide community wellbeing activities (e.g. Blossoming Communities activities and yoga)
6. Continue to engage local primary schools, including providing training to school staff to continue activities beyond March 2024
7. Support the Hirst Park football tournament, organised by Ashington Town Football Club
8. Continue legacy support contract
9. Install new pavilion shutters to improve access and use of pavilion
10. Reordering of pavilion to create more storage and a more welcoming space

6. Discussion

A number of areas of Hirst Park life are being considered in light of the end of funding in March 2024. In all cases, these areas have benefited significantly from Lottery funding and will be diminished from April 2024, though to differing extents.

6.1. Hirst Park Growing Zone

6.1.1. NCC officers and Full Circle Food Project (FCFP) staff are currently finalising a lease agreement to underpin continued occupation of the Growing Zone. FCFP make full use of the Growing Zone site, running a range of events and activities there, as well as supporting activities and volunteering in the wider park.

6.1.2. In the months towards the end of Lottery funding, the Revival project has allocated budget to support FCFP activity within the Growing Zone but also from the pavilion and in the wider park.

6.1.3. After March 2024, FCFP will continue to operate from and fully utilise the Growing Zone. FCFP will continue to bring clear benefits to the local community and enhance use and enjoyment of the wider park through their programme of activities and events.

6.2. Hirst Park Pavilion

6.2.1. Hirst Park's pavilion is the heart of Hirst Park and is the focus of the petition's concerns. The pavilion has been the centre point for the range of Hirst Park Revival activities as well as the working base for project staff. It provides a working base for the park's horticultural staff and a home for the park's bowls club.

6.2.2. During the remaining months of the Revival Project, promotion and use of the pavilion will continue care of Northumberland Communities Together and the Full Circle Food Project, ensuring access for events and activities including tea and coffee mornings, yoga sessions, Blossoming Communities workshops and other activities.

6.2.3. NCC staff are currently progressing plans to install new security shutters to the pavilion, to create additional storage, to provide new furniture and to redecorate. Project budget is available to support this, subject to approval from NLHF.

6.2.4. After March 2024, the pavilion will continue to provide a space for events and activities. Countryside and Green Spaces staff will continue to work with staff from Northumberland Communities Together and FCFP to ensure continued use of the pavilion for community events and activities.

6.3. Hirst Park greenspace

6.3.1. Capital investment during the Hirst Park Revival project has greatly enhanced the park, its infrastructure and horticulture. The revamped park is managed and maintained by the County Council's Countryside and Green Spaces Team and Neighbourhood Services NEAT Teams. Ashington Town Council provide financial support towards the additional maintenance and management of the park to help ensure that the capital improvements / enhancements made to the park are sustained to a high standard.

6.3.2. During the remaining months of the project and thereafter, management and maintenance of the park will remain the responsibility of NCC staff. NCC and FCFP staff will continue to seek to bring volunteers into the park to undertake general maintenance and horticultural tasks.

6.4. Hirst Park activities

6.4.1. Another main focus for the concerns of petitioners, the Hirst Park Revival Project's funded activity programme, developed and managed by project staff, has ensured that the park has been able to offer a range of activities and events for the local community.

6.4.2. During the remaining months, events and activities will continue within the park care of NCC, NCT and FCFP.

6.4.3. After March 2024, NCC will have no dedicated budget to support a continuing activity programme. Northumberland Communities Together and Full Circle Food Project will continue to be able to use the pavilion as a venue for their own activities and events. NCC will continue to make the pavilion available for community use such as regular residents' coffee mornings and a location for youth support work.

6.5. Hirst Park Digital Engagement

6.5.1. The Friends of Hirst Park facebook page, developed and managed by project staff, has around 2,000 followers. Regular posts raise awareness of the park and advertise upcoming events and activities. In addition to the park's social media presence, the Revival Project has created a Hirst Park Memories website to collect and curate written and photographic material submitted by local people and further afield.

6.5.2. During the remaining months of the project, and thereafter, the park's facebook page will continue to be provided. The Hirst Park Memories website will be in place for at least 10 years, though there are currently no dedicated NCC staff to accept contributions and undertake administration.

7. Summary

- 7.1. The Hirst Park Revival Project has delivered significant improvements to Hirst Park, both in terms of the capital works but also in terms of the public's use and enjoyment of the site. Project staff, in particular the Park Development Officer and Project Coordinator, have brought about a wide range of events and activities within the park that has enriched the lives of local people.
- 7.2. When funding ends in March 2024, the Hirst Revival Project as a funded and staffed project, will not be able to continue. However, a number of activities and events in Hirst Park will continue, managed by partners such as the Full Circle Food Project and NCC's Northumberland Communities Together team. The park will continue to be able to host events organised by local community groups and organisations such as Heart of the Hirst.
- 7.3. NCC's Countryside and Green Spaces Team are keen to maintain existing and develop new relationships with local people and organisations in order to ensure that the park continues to play an important role in the enjoyment, health and wellbeing of local people. The park has achieved the prestigious 'Green Flag' award which puts it amongst the best parks in the country. One of the key elements for maintenance of the park's Green Flag status is the active involvement of the local community in the park and whilst the formation of a creation of a 'Friends of' group (or similar) was an aspiration of the Hirst Park Revival Project that has not been met, the formation of a Friends group remains an on-going aspiration for NCC and NCC remains fully committed to ensuring the parks Green Flag status is maintained.

Implications

Policy	The Council has recently adopted a new Environment Policy Statement that strengthens its commitment to maintaining protecting and enhancing the environment. Ensuring that local communities have access to safe, high-quality parks and green spaces is a key commitment within the Environment Policy and the Council will continue to work with partners to ensure that community activities and events take place at Hirst Park and the park is managed and maintained to retain its 'Green Flag' status.
Finance and value for money	Project funding continues until the end of March 2024. Thereafter management and maintenance of Hirst Park continues using normal revenue funding (with some support from Ashington Town Council).
Legal	None
Procurement	None.
Human Resources	Countryside and Green Spaces staff and Neighbourhood Services NEAT staff manage and maintain Hirst Park.
Property	The site is owned and managed by the County Council.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes	Some issues relating to possible negative effects for older visitors, less able visitors and women and girls. Continued NCC presence in the park together with a continuation (albeit partial) of activities and events may ameliorate this.

Risk Assessment	None.
Crime Disorder	& A reduction in activities and events at Hirst Park may give rise to an increase in antisocial behaviour. However, the Council works closely with partners organisations and Northumbria Police to mitigate this risk and address any ASB that occurs.
Customer Consideration	A reduction in staffing levels and number of events and activities is giving rise to concerns from members of the local community. However, there will still be events and activities at the park and the pavilion remains available to provide a space for events and activities.
Carbon reduction	None.
Health and Wellbeing	The revival project has rejuvenated Hirst Park and the park now provides a diverse range of activities for local residents to participate in and offers a high quality green space and leisure facility for the local community supporting their health and wellbeing. Work will continue with partners to make sure that a range of activities and events are provided and that the park remains well managed and maintained to help support the health and wellbeing of local people.
Wards	Hirst.

Background papers:

None.

Report sign off:

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	n/a
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	n/a
Relevant Executive Director	pp Paul Jones
Chief Executive	n/a
Portfolio Holder(s)	Colin Horncastle

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