

High Helbeck Green Recovery Challenge Fund ~ project evaluation



High Helbeck estate overview image created by a local artist

March 2022

Green Recovery Challenge Fund

High Helbeck Project Evaluation

Contents

Summary ~ High Helbeck at a glance and evaluation headlines	3
1. Introduction ~ project context and approach to this evaluation	6
2. High Helbeck - Measures of Success and Headline Figures	8
2.1 Nature Conservation and Restoration	
2.2 Connecting People with Nature	
2.3 Resilience and Employment	
2.4 Overall assessment	
3. Project Achievements and Outcomes	14
3.1 Nature Conservation and Restoration	
• Habitat improvement and monitoring	
• Increasing engagement and influencing practice within the land management and conservation sectors	
3.2 Connecting People with Nature	26
• Increasing engagement and awareness amongst local communities and young people	
3.3 Resilience and Employment	29
• Increasing heritage skills and employment opportunities.	
• Supporting project partners, local contractors and other businesses	
3.4 Additional project outcomes	32
• High Helbeck is a project that is well managed, with an effective project team and communications activity steered by a strong partnership	
4. Observations, learning and programme improvements	34

Appendix 1: High Helbeck ~ Fixed Point Photography Information

Appendix 2: A Vision for High Helbeck

Summary ~ High Helbeck at a Glance

High Helbeck is a rapid 15-month project that has delivered a **complex programme of nature recovery and community engagement** through the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) supported by Defra and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

Despite the short time frame, and the impacts of COVID 19, together High Helbeck has delivered the following achievements for biodiversity and for local communities.

For Nature Conservation and Restoration

- There has been **a total of 355ha of habitat restoration and management**, including over **42,000 trees planted across 153ha of new woodland, 79ha of peatland restoration, 25 wader scrapes across 85ha, a 10ha vegetation buffer zone and improved management within 28ha of existing woodland plantation.**
- A strong **monitoring baseline** has been established for **34 breeding bird species**, and for **15 fixed point photography locations.**

For Connecting People with Nature

- **296 people engaged** across **19 events to develop physical and mental wellbeing.**
- **43 local people** participated in **public engagement events.**
- **33 volunteer days** were delivered, and **7 new volunteers** engaged.
- **3.5 mile (5.6km) High Helbeck walk created** ~ for which the project **levered in an additional £13,582** from the **Farming in Protected Landscapes fund**, with **two new bridges and one interpretation** panel installed.

For Resilience and Employment

- **£527,779** has been invested in the project, of which **£469,400 was awarded by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.**
- **£365,820 (78%)** of the GRCF funds were spent **within 50 miles of High Helbeck.**
- An **RSPB Project Officer seconded** to the North Pennines AONB Partnership.
- **12 month Graduate Trainee** employed to work alongside the Project Officer and partners who has **gone on to secure full time employment** with the Eden Rivers Trust.
- **6 month RSPB monitoring officer post** who has **gone on to secure full time employment** as an ecologist within Yorkshire.
- A **strong partnership** has been forged, building **connections, trust and cooperation**, between **the landowners, public agencies, conservation charities and the North Pennines AONB team** – as well as wider partners.

Summary ~ High Helbeck evaluation headlines

The High Helbeck project set out an ambitious programme of habitat conservation, community engagement and monitoring, over a 15-month period. Through excellent partnership, shared ambition, engagement of local contractors and effective use of skilled staff the project can demonstrate delivery against the three strategic monitoring requirements of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The most significant external challenge was the coronavirus pandemic, despite which the project managed to deliver the majority of the intended engagement and volunteering activity. This is testament to the tenacity of the group and the cohesion of the partnership.

A substantial amount of conservation and nature recovery work has been delivered; neighbouring land managers and local conservation staff have been engaged with and feel connected with the project and have already been inspired to look differently at their own land that could trigger even more substantial landscape change at-scale.

The local community of landowners, contractors, young people, and locals are aware of the project, and many feel personally invested in the outcomes that have been delivered. The events and activities have given opportunities to visit and to engage directly with the project and the wildlife of the estate.

In a short space of time this project has become an exemplar of a partners working together to deliver and integrate nature conservation and people engagement within the wider needs of an upland moorland estate.

Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme

There was much that the GRCF programme got right, providing additional investment in nature conservation and people engagement activity has been welcomed and the flexibility of the funding in being able to cover 100% of the implementation costs as shown in the success of the tree planting and woodland creation programme (compared to other grant schemes) is welcomed.

Other feedback gathered through this evaluation relating to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme and for use as part of the overall evaluation includes three key inter-related points that would be the main recommendations to emerge from this evaluation report.

1. A compressed application period and timetable

It was noted that the project application submitted as part of the GRCF was an excellent example of intended activity with clear outputs and outcomes that helped set the framework for the project evaluation and everything that has been delivered by the partners.

The quality of the application as submitted **was in spite of rather than because of the application timetable**, the project came together in a very short space of time and as noted by feedback from the Advisory Group **“more lead in time would have been helpful”** and **“oven ready does not really exist”**.

- 2. Building in full cost recovery for all project partners** ~ Whilst this funding programme enabled voluntary sector partners such as the Woodland Trust and the RSPB to recover their staff contributions as part of the project cost, the North Pennines AONB as the lead partner was unable to recover their costs contributed to the scheme. As a small publicly funded organisation this places the AONB at a disadvantage compared to larger national charities and leads to an opportunity cost for the organisation in taking on this type of work as development and management resource allocated to this project has been unable to be focussed elsewhere.

- 3. Management and maintenance funding** ~ Provision of management and maintenance funding is an important component of any project, particularly for any nature conservation and recovery programmes. For High Helbeck there has been an investment in the landscape and species recovery over a 15 month period but projects of this type needs to be able to access further support for ongoing management and maintenance within the original programme design to help protect the gains that have already been delivered.

The evaluation demonstrates that High Helbeck has been an excellent project that has delivered significant benefits for nature recovery, connecting people with nature as well as outcomes for resilience and employment. There is a commitment to securing the project legacy through management and maintenance commitments as well as allowing for the development of a vision document for the estate that will be a guide for further activity and securing additional resources.

1. Introduction

Background and context

High Helbeck – transforming an upland landscape for nature and people is a 15-month Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF) project, supported by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

In December 2020, Defra/NLHF awarded the North Pennines AONB Partnership, £469,400 or 89% of the total anticipated project delivery costs of £527,779. The match funding of just over £58K was to be a combination of just over £39K from the North Pennines AONB Partnership; staff costs in-kind from RSPB and the AONB Partnership, to the value of £15K, and volunteer time at a value of £4K. These were all secured at the time of application.

The project ran from December 2020 to March 2022, with restrictions from the coronavirus pandemic having to be managed throughout the project period.

From the original application for grant-aid it was the intention of the project to:

- Improve key natural heritage habitats of the High Helbeck estate (notably, peatlands, woodlands and watercourses), enhancing the connectivity and diversity of these important landscape features, and supporting nature recovery. A monitoring programme is used to assess these benefits.
- Increase engagement and awareness amongst local communities and young people from targeted urban areas.
- Increase engagement and influence practice within the land management and conservation sectors.
- Increase heritage skills and employment opportunities.
- Support project partners, local contractors and other businesses to benefit directly through the Green Recovery Programme.
- Ensure that the High Helbeck project is well managed, with an effective project team and communications, activity steered by a strong partnership of Advisory Group members.

Approach to evaluation

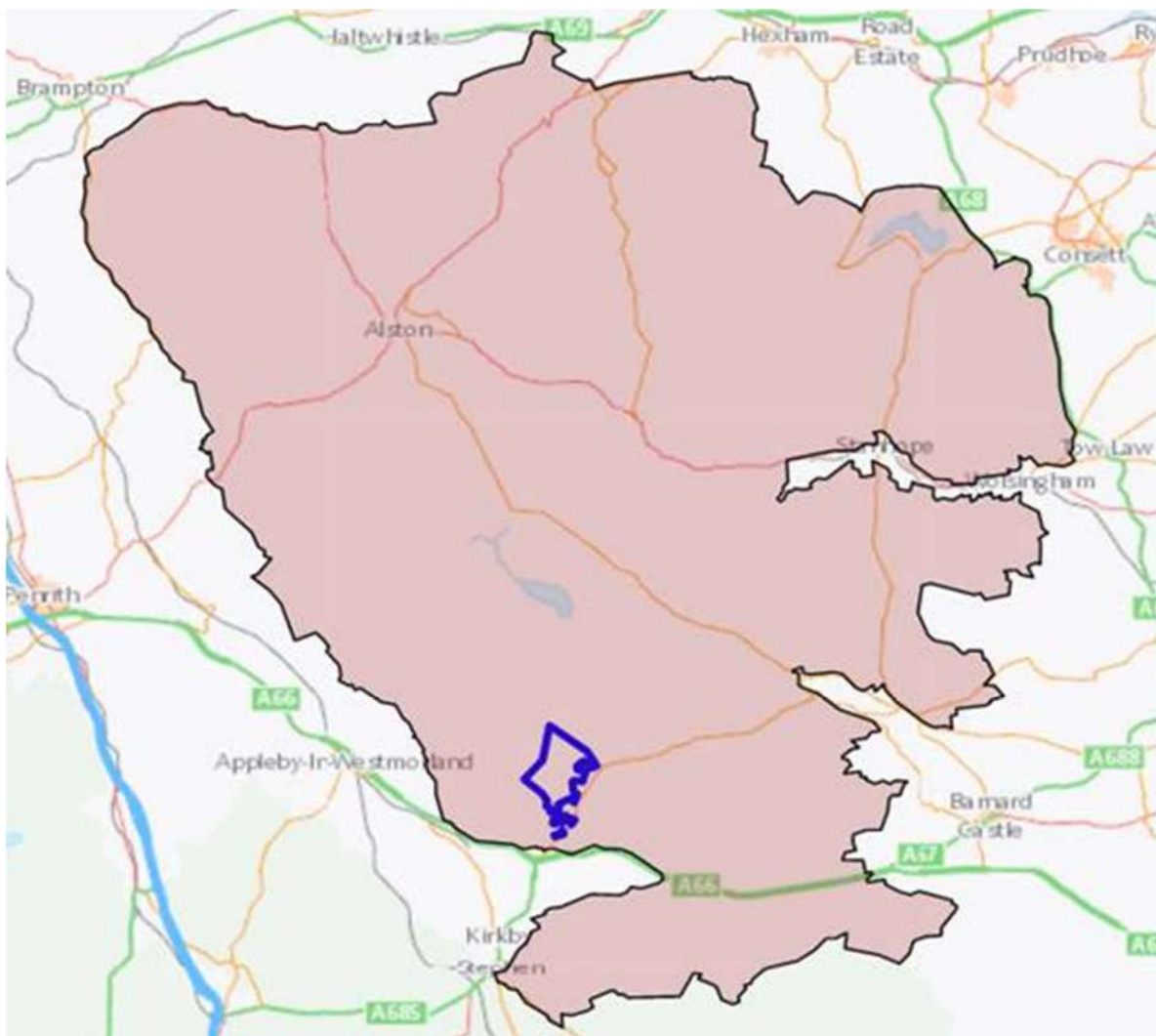
It is a condition of NLHF funding that recipients carry out an end-of-project evaluation. NLHF have published specific guidance on evaluation, with an emphasis on the need to look across the whole range of activity, to identify how the project has delivered against the approved purposes. While there is inevitably an element of judgement and criticism in an evaluation process, for those involved it can provide a lot of positive feedback.

As part of the application to seek funding it was identified to follow NLHF best practice and retain the services of an external evaluation consultant in order to conduct a “light touch” longitudinal evaluation of the project. The key activities identified were:

- Develop an evaluation framework and baseline for all identified project activities

- Work with the project staff and High Helbeck Advisory Group to help gather evaluation evidence that is appropriate and proportionate in scale given the size of the project
- Attend a public engagement event and conservation staff showcase to gather further evaluation information
- Complete a final evaluation close to the end of the project delivery phase

The overall aim of this evaluation is to provide an external perspective and produce a short readable document with appropriate images that aims to pull together all the outputs and outcomes from project delivery within one place.



Location of High Helbeck (blue) within the North Pennines AONB

2. High Helbeck Measures of Success and Headline Outputs

The measures of success and baseline intended outputs to be delivered were collected from an assessment of the application and project plans submitted as part of the original funding bid. These figures helped develop a monitoring and evaluation framework that is a flexible tool to present data according to need. Presentation of actual achievements has been sorted to meet the monitoring requirements for GRCF projects and is presented using the 3 key headline themes of:

- Nature Conservation, restoration and nature based solutions
- Connecting people with nature
- Building resilience and employment

The monitoring and evaluation framework was used to monitor and review progress throughout the life of the project.

2.1 ~ Nature Conservation and Restoration

Baseline intended outputs	Actual achievements to March 2022
79ha of peatland will be restored	79ha of peatland restored.
40,000 trees planted	42,020 trees planted.
153ha of the estate will have increased tree and scrub cover, 63ha will be for wood pasture	153ha of the estate has increased tree and scrub cover, 63ha is for wood pasture.
20 wader scrapes and reprofiled section of sikes benefitting waders across 85ha	25 wader scrapes completed, and sikes reprofiled to benefit waders, across 85ha.
One vegetation buffer zone, 1086m x 10m	10ha completed, against an intended 1ha.
Survey and monitoring programme to support future monitoring beyond project timetable	Survey and monitoring programme completed with a population estimate for 34 different species. Whole estate species list totals 75.
Engagement with 10 other estates, covering 50,000ha	11 land managers (and others with land management interests) attended Landowner Engagement events.
Engagement with all adjacent landowners	Local farmers, land managers and Ministry of Defence adjoining the estate have been engaged
Engagement with 30 conservation staff (50 in project plan).	7 senior Defra, NLHF and Natural England Staff in August 2021. 12 conservation staff and 3 project funders engaged in March 2022.
Additional outputs delivered for Nature Conservation, restoration and nature based solutions:	Work has been carried out on 28ha of existing plantation compartments of the estate to improve condition and ensure they better complement the GRCF project tree planting.



Sphagnum moss collection for peatland restoration



AONB Team day with trainees and staff discussing peatland restoration on High Helbeck

Final evaluation – March 2022

High Helbeck has delivered a landscape impact over 355 hectares

Nature Conservation and restoration outputs have exceeded original intentions

There has been a **total of 327ha of habitat restoration completed**, including over 42,000 trees planted, and 25 wader scrapes. The project has gone beyond its original scope by working with and **improving existing woodland compartments totalling 28ha**, and by significantly expanding the area of protected watercourses that included:

- Planting around 900 new trees
- Removal of empty tree tubes, and reusing these elsewhere
- Additional tubed planting
- Bare planting with Hawthorn and Alder
- Willow pegging
- ‘Doubling up’ short tubes onto new 1.2m stakes where losses from significant browsing was evident
- Fence repairs to make enclosures stock proof
- Replacement/installation of a new water gate
- Locally collected tree seed sown in Tarn Gill and the Connecting Woodland

This work will have a transformative impact for this upland landscape, and benefit a wealth of upland biodiversity. A strong baseline has been established with population estimates for 35 different bird species recorded, enabling evaluation of short-term and long-term benefits. For some species – such as wading birds - it’s likely benefits will accrue immediately, in the first breeding season. Whilst the woodland areas will take longer to establish, the exclusion of grazing will enable recovery of the field layer vegetation. This will rapidly benefit some invertebrate and small mammal species. To help facilitate this, the Woodland Trust is committed to beat up and maintain the improved woodland habitat for 30 days per year over 5 years, worth around £35K in total.

2.2 ~ Connecting People with Nature

Baseline intended outputs	Actual achievements to March 2022
<p>22 engagement activities with the opportunity to gain physical and mental wellbeing, comprised of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 guided visits and engagement activity • 8 community events • 10 public engagement events <p>350 people with opportunity to gain physical and mental well-being, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80 participants engaged in community guided visits • 120 people participating in events • 150 people participating in public engagement events <p>80 days of volunteering contributed</p> <p>Additional outputs delivered for connecting people with nature:</p>	<p>There were 19 engagement activities with opportunities to gain physical and mental wellbeing, comprised of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 guided visits and engagement activities • 8 community events delivered • 8 public engagement events were held <p>296 people participated in opportunities to gain physical and mental well-being, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 174 participants engaged in community guided visits • 79 people participated in events • 43 people participated in public engagement events <p>33 volunteer days were delivered, and 7 new volunteers were engaged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One interpretation panel installed. • 3.5 mile (5.6km) High Helbeck walk created as a new visitor trail to promote public access. • New walk leaflet and guide being produced to be made available locally



Public event ~ sketching



Public event ~ Swindale circular walk

Final evaluation – March 2022

296 people engaged across 19 events to develop physical and mental wellbeing

Connecting people with nature outputs are in line with original intentions

The project succeeded in delivering most of the intended programme of events, though there was difficulty achieving the target number of attendees due to the ongoing constraints imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic and the need to follow necessary government restrictions and guidelines. A mix of creative and innovative events have captured the imagination of the participants across a range of activities, which have showcased the High Helbeck landscape and its wildlife.

“The walk from Brough to the High Helbeck Estate and back was a great success and we also had local folk musician Bill Lloyd entertain us during our lunch. Ben and Nicolette said they would be happy to run this event again, which was great to hear.”

Project manager reflections



Sharing best practice site visit ~ March 2022

2.3 ~ Resilience and Employment

Baseline intended outputs	Actual achievements to March 2022
<p>£242,021 investment in NGO partners</p> <p>Increased expenditure on capital works undertaken by local contractors</p> <p>12-month Graduate Trainee to work alongside Project Officer and partners</p> <p>Secondment of Project Officer from RSPB to North Pennines AONB Partnership</p> <p>Additional outputs delivered for resilience and employment:</p>	<p>£242,021 has been invested in NGO partners.</p> <p>£190,000 (40%) of capital works were undertaken by local contractors within 25 miles of the project, and £365,820 (78%) were within 50 miles of the project.</p> <p>A 12-month Graduate Trainee was employed to work alongside the Project Officer and partners.</p> <p>An RSPB Project Officer was seconded to the North Pennines AONB Partnership with an RSPB monitoring officer recruited.</p> <p>£13,582 of additional investment has been secured from the <i>Farming in Protected Landscapes</i> fund.</p>

Final evaluation – March 2022

Resilience and employment outputs have exceeded original intentions

Two full-time staff plus one six month contract employee have gained significant experience and new skills.

NGO partners have benefitted from significant investment being able to claim in kind time as a cash contribution and enable the RSPB to back fill the Conservation Officer role.

Local contractors have been substantial beneficiaries of the investment in the project with nearly 80% of project funding .

The presence of the project has triggered an additional £13½K funding to develop the visitor infrastructure at High Helbeck through the creation of a new visitor trail.



Trainee Anna's step project

It should be noted that the evaluation work has highlighted the anomaly of the North Pennines AONB being unable to claim back in kind time as part of the GRCF process, unlike voluntary sector partners meaning a smaller impact on resilience and employment. As a small organisation there is an opportunity cost of committing resources to bidding for and managing projects of this type that could be reflected in the initial programme design. This point along with some other reflections and

feedback relating to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme are picked up in Section 4 ~ observations, learning and programme improvements.

2.4 ~ Overall assessment

This project has delivered what is set out to achieve and has gone beyond the initial targets. Of note are:

- A well-integrated programme of large-scale conservation work covering 355ha, developing and enhancing habitat links from the valley floor to the uplands delivered in a landscape of traditional grouse moors.
- The strong monitoring baseline with good population estimates for 34 different bird species and fixed point photography locations set up at 15 sites across the estate.
- Wide-ranging opportunities for engagement of communities, from groups of young people, through to a programme of events, and direct volunteering opportunities.
- Local landowners and agents are engaged with the project, and there will be a long-term relationship to build understanding and learning ~ High Helbeck has become an exemplar project for conservation land management in the area.
- A highly successful and active partnership, that had blended the knowledge and skills of landowners, NGOs, and AONB staff.
- The commitment from the Woodland Trust to beat up and maintain the improved woodland habitat for 30 days per year over 5 years, worth around £35K in total.
- The use of the project to secure £13½K of additional funding.



Sphagnum planting by contractors

3. Project Achievements and Outcomes

Collecting qualitative evidence relates to the change and outcomes that have been delivered by a project or scheme. This is important in relation to ‘people’ goals such as engagement, learning and skills training, where numbers often miss the main story about how people’s perceptions of their heritage, and their aspirations, have been changed.

Measuring outcomes are often more difficult to measure than quantitative outputs due to a number of complex factors such as:

- landscape change taking place over a longer period of time than delivery of a project and/or
- attributing individual change within people to one particular moment or activity...

As part of developing the approach to monitoring and evaluation, six “project outcomes” were identified, discussed and agreed with the project team. These outcomes have been linked to the GRCF monitoring requirements as shown in the following table.

Green Recovery Challenge Fund monitoring requirements	High Helbeck project outcomes
• Nature Conservation, restoration and nature based solutions	1. The key natural heritage habitats of the High Helbeck estate will be improved and monitored.
	2. Increasing engagement and influencing practice within the land management and conservation sectors.
• Connecting People with Nature	3. Increasing engagement and awareness amongst local communities and young people from targeted urban areas.
• Resilience and Employment	4. Increasing heritage skills and employment opportunities.
	5. Supporting project partners, local contractors and other businesses to benefit directly through the Green Recovery Programme
Additional project outcome:	6. High Helbeck is a project that is well managed, with an effective project team and communications activity steered by a strong partnership of Advisory Group members.

In reporting outcomes the source material for this section comes from information collected throughout the duration of the project by the High Helbeck team, along with conversations held with wider project partners and begins to demonstrate the impact, benefit and change delivered through this Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme.

3.1 ~ Nature Conservation and Restoration

It's going to be great to see it develop and grow over the coming years, and I don't think I'll ever drive past the site without saying to myself "we did that!"

Contractor working at High Helbeck

Outcomes delivered for nature conservation and restoration

Project outcome 1. The key natural heritage habitats of the High Helbeck estate will be improved and monitored. The connectivity and diversity of important landscape features will be improved to support nature recovery. Peatland on the site will be in better condition and more resilient to climate change. It will be a functioning wetland ecosystem again. Woodland will be richer and more textured and diverse, natural flood management and soil stability will be promoted, more carbon will be stored, habitat will be diversified and biodiversity boosted. Watercourses on the estate and beyond will be in better condition with greatly improved habitat for wading birds and other species.

An additional 37ha of nature conservation and restoration activity delivered

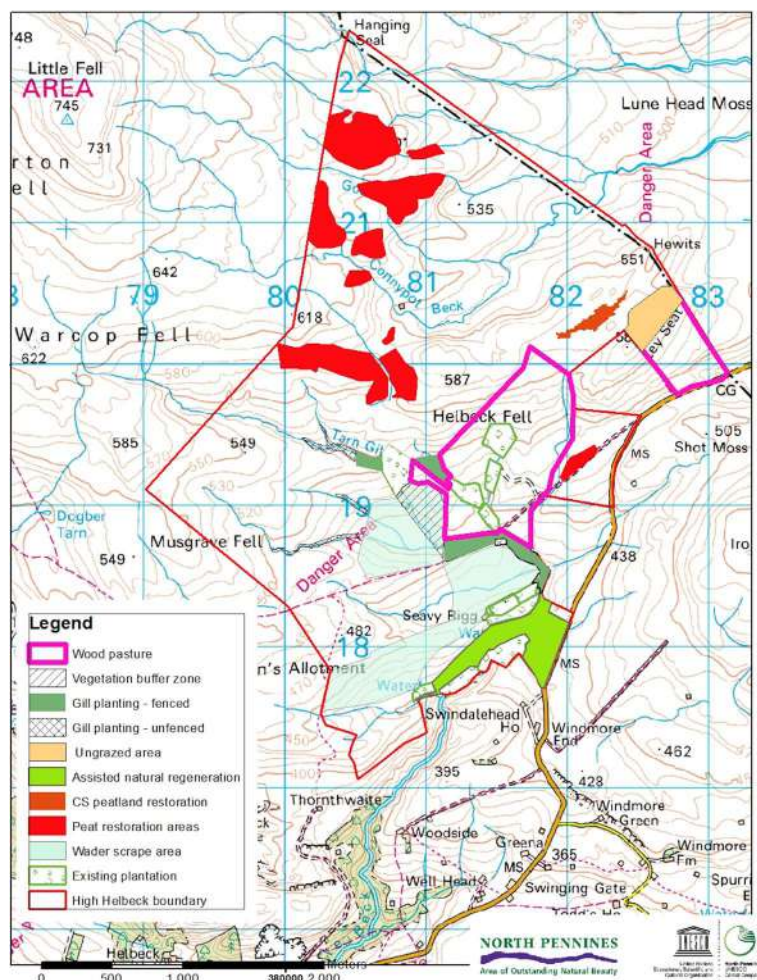
The High Helbeck project has exceeded its habitat improvement outputs. The partnership has delivered an ambitious programme of habitat restoration, at a landscape scale, on a private grouse moor estate.

In addition to the original work programme covering 318ha, improvements were made to 28ha of existing woodland, and a buffer strip of 10 ha was created instead of the planned 1ha area.

High Helbeck Green Recovery Challenge Fund

(c) Crown copyright. All rights reserved
Durham County Council. LA100049055. 2021

1:26,049



Map showing the location of the restoration work at High Helbeck

Peatland restoration

79ha of peatland has been restored. **Peatland restoration has included the use of stone dams, coir log dams, hag blocking, sphagnum planting, heather harvesting and spreading, and hagg-edge re-profiling.** The materials were delivered by helicopter. This requires careful planning, access to challenging and remote locations, and tough working conditions.

The peatland restoration techniques used at High Helbeck were promoted in a press release and blog on the North Pennines AONB website: [World Wetlands Day 2022: new technique to boost North Pennines peatland restoration.](#)



Helicopter ready to collect stone for peatland restoration dams

Woodland improvements

In total, nearly 43,000 trees have been planted and seeded; 10,400 trees have been established in the assisted regeneration area, 15,364 trees in the gill network, and over 16,270 trees in the wood pasture areas. 900 trees have been used to re-stocking existing plantation.

Through discussions with the project partnership and ground-truthing over the course of the project the team made changes to original planting plans that were set out on the initial GRCF map. Despite this over 40,000 trees were planted across 153 hectares of the High Helbeck Estate. In addition, work was carried out on the existing plantations of the estate to make sure they are in a better condition than before the project started, and that they work with the GRCF project tree planting.

Existing Plantations ~ The Woodland Trust planted around 900 new trees; removed any empty tree tubes (and reused these elsewhere); carried out willow pegging, doubled-up short tubes into new 1.2m stakes (where losses from significant browsing was evident); carried out fence repairs to make enclosures stock proof and project staff collected tree seed from Swindale Wood SSSI and sowed the seed in two fenced gills. Contractors also planted 400 goat willow pegs in wet areas, from willow coppiced from other areas of the estate which has been a great success.



Phase 1 Woodland - Contractors working in existing plantations

Assisted Natural Regeneration Area: The Woodland Trust created a new 21.24 hectare ungrazed compartment by installing new stock fencing and carrying out fencing repairs. This will allow the existing trees to naturally regenerate throughout the new enclosure over time. The Woodland Trust also planted around 10,000 trees without any tree protection in clumps within the new enclosure. Local contractors also removed 1.7km of redundant fencing from this area.

The 10,400 trees planted by the Woodland Trust were all over size nursery stock between 60cm and 120cm and included **2,500 hawthorn, 2,000 rowan, 2,000 downy birch, 1,500 alder, 1,000 wild cherry and 1,000 crab apple.**

Gill Planting: 16.96ha of gill planting using 15,364 trees. These trees were either planted using a combination of metal weld mesh reusable enclosures or within tree tubes as part of new fencing enclosures around the gills.

Wood Pasture: 114.43ha wood pasture creation using 16,276 trees. The wood pasture trees were either planted in reusable cactus cages or 20x20 stock fenced enclosures.



Phase 2 Woodland - 20 x 20 fenced area part of wood pasture creation

In September 2021, project staff and trainees collected 2 buckets of downy birch seed, 2 buckets of rowan berries and a bucket of hazel nuts. Seed has now been collected and sown from wych elm, downy birch, rowan, hazel, and hawthorn trees, and wych elm seeds sown in spring 2021 are now showing as seedlings.



Phase 2 Woodland - Cactus cages Helbeck Fell wood pasture area

The importance of the funding available through the Green Recovery Challenge Fund that contributed to the success of the tree planting that assisted natural regeneration and allowed for more than 20% open space tree planting when compared to other government woodland creation grants has been highlighted in the following case study prepared by Pete Leeson, Partnerships Manager for the Woodland Trust.

Tree and scrub establishment case study

Tree and scrub establishment at High Helbeck has been designed and implemented by the Woodland Trust following its extensive experience in upland planting across the Pennines and South West Scotland in the last 15 years. In order to achieve a *more tree'd* landscape the Trust used a range of innovative tree protection methods for tree and scrub planting. The approach taken is guided by ecological principles with the intention of integrating scrub and trees into a landscape with multiple ecological and land management objectives. The Trust has linked its design to the landscape needs including those of birds like curlew and lapwing so across the planting zones careful attention has been paid to locate trees in areas which will not threaten the wider habitat.

The use of variable spacing, density and species creates future seed source for natural regeneration, short and long term habitat changes and early pollen / nectar and bird nesting opportunities. With use of variable open space options in tree planting compartments we can utilise the existing vegetation to increase pollen / nectar sources for invertebrates which will have positive knock on for birds at the same time as securing scrub and tree roosting sites for birds like woodcock and black grouse.

In the Trust's experience **the type of planting we want to see here [and similar sites] which maximises benefits for nature would not be eligible under the England Woodland Creation Offer**. We have, however, successfully used Countryside Stewardship and indeed our own funding to secure the approach we wanted yet, of course, creating woodland which then falls outside the National Forestry Inventory and future protection and often at the whim of scheme rules and on short term contracts.

For large schemes mixing and matching of grants is essential to create the nuanced landscape we want to see which is a landscape akin to that which nature intended i.e. one where we find peat bogs, heaths, wetlands juxtaposed with birch, pine and scrub in a jumbled up mix.

The GRCF funds were able to pay for 100% of the cost, whereas Countryside Stewardship rates are designed to cover 80%, with England Woodland Creation Offer being more generous but still not keeping up with increasing labour and material costs.

Wetland creation and enhancement

Following the two phase of wetland enhancement work in 2021 and 2022, 25 new wader scrapes have been created (exceeding the target of 20 scrapes), as well as 160 metres of beck reprofiling benefitting waders, across 85ha.

Instead of the original plan to create a vegetation buffer zone along the beck (a 1086x10m strip), the landowners suggested that the opposite side of the beck could be left completely un-grazed creating a much bigger vegetation buffer zone of 10.54 hectares. This will lead to a big reduction in the sediment entering the beck, will benefit aquatic biodiversity and promote natural flood management.



Phase 1 wetland, wader scrape



Lapwing adult



Lapwing chick



Phase 1 wetland work ~ creating wader scrapes



Phase 1 wetland work - wader scrape aerial Tarn Gill

Wetland creation and enhancement

The wetland creation work was featured in a blog on the North Pennines AONB website [New habitats for upland waders in the North Pennines](#).

Since completion of the Phase 1 scrapes, there have been incidental records of wading birds using the new wetland areas. In March 2021, around 80 curlew were spotted flying up from the new scrapes with wader use likely to increase during the breeding season.

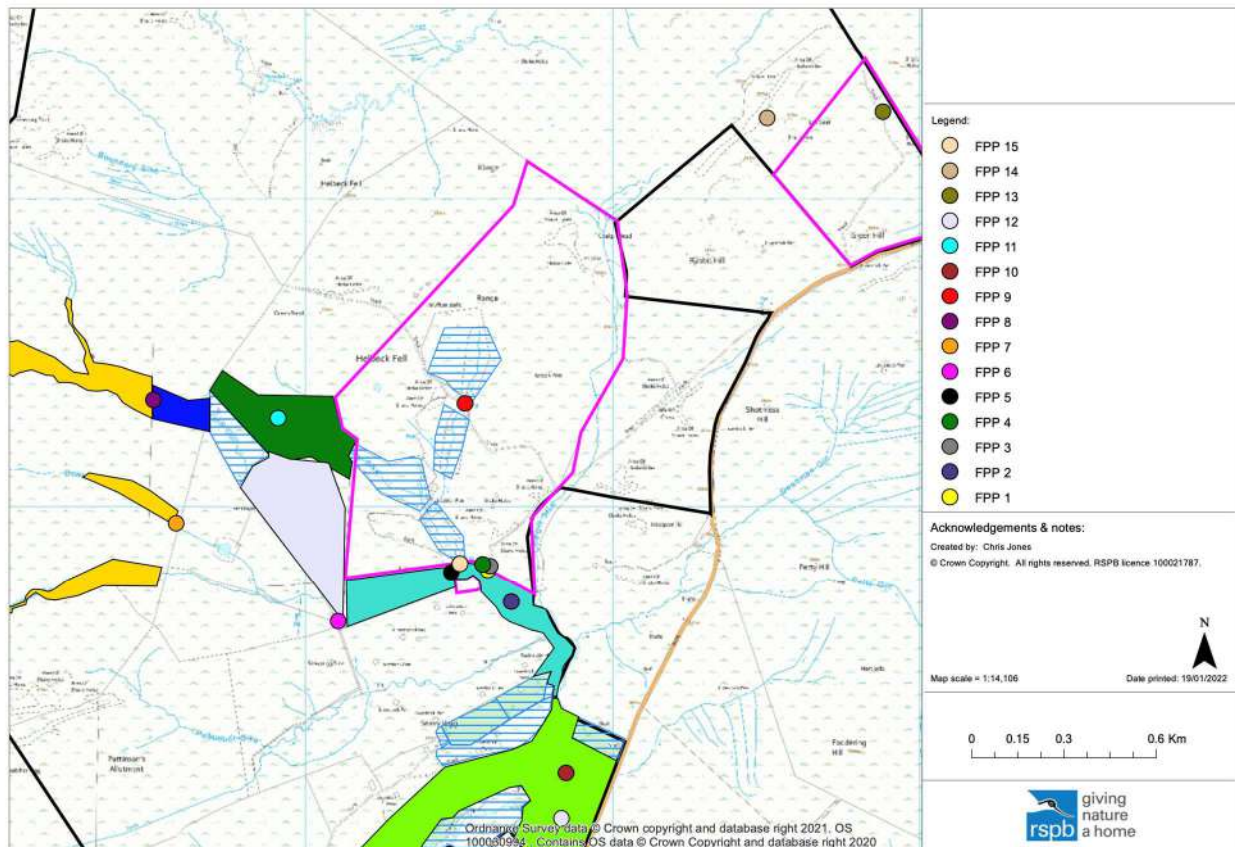


Phase 2 wetland work

Species Monitoring

Baseline monitoring was carried out in 2021. The methods and the data have been written up and stored by partners, enabling repeat monitoring, depending on funding availability. RSPB has produced a monitoring report. See sample breeding bird monitoring maps on the next page.

As an additional component of the monitoring programme, the High Helbeck project has established a Fixed-Point Photography (FPP) programme. This is an effective and easy method of recording and monitoring visual changes within the landscape. It involves taking a photograph, from the same point, at intervals over a period of time. Full details are in **Appendix 1**.



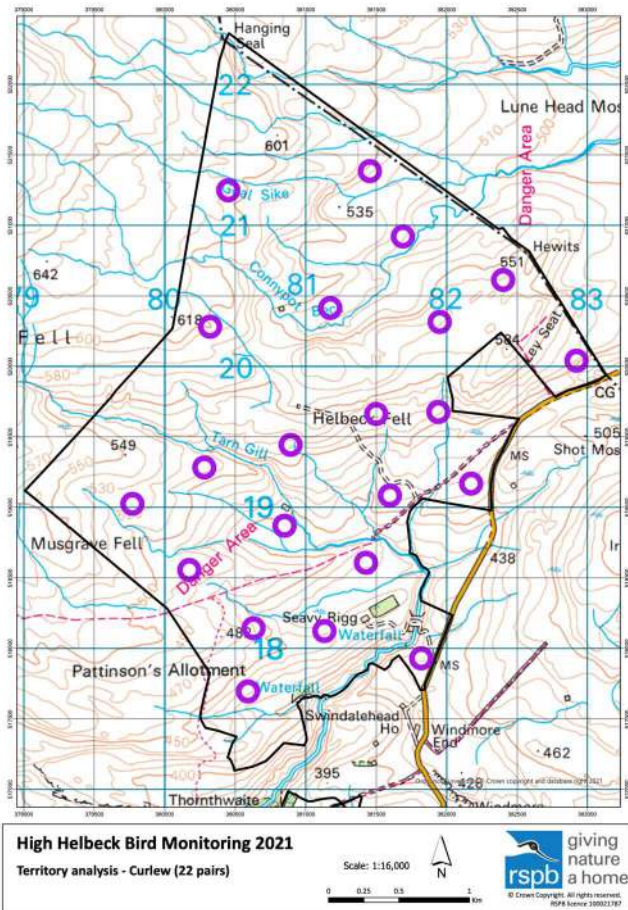
Map showing the location of High Helbeck Fixed Point Photography locations

RSPB monitoring report summary

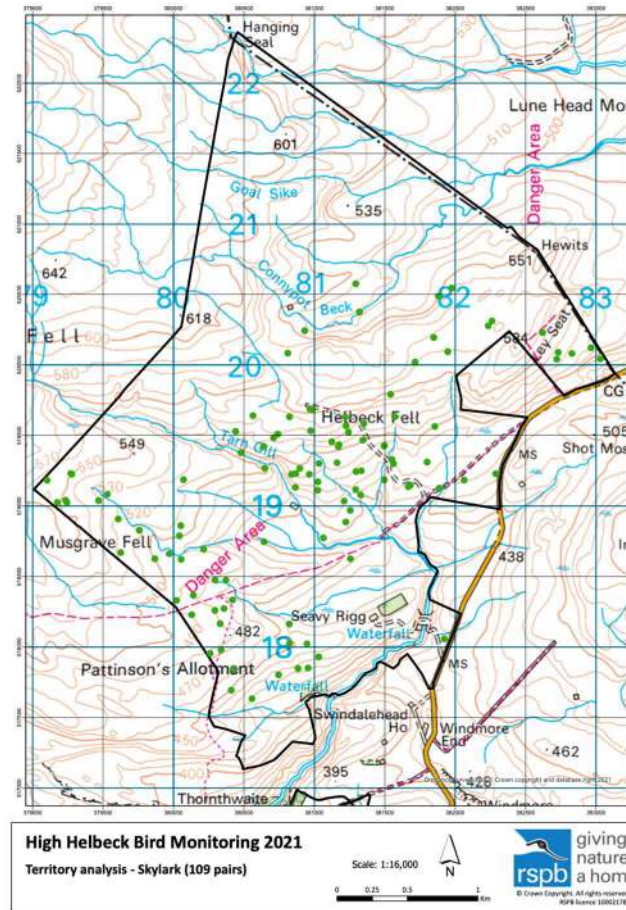
A programme of ecological monitoring was established at High Helbeck in 2021 with the aim of establishing a baseline and enabling the future assessment of the effectiveness of conservation interventions. Birds were surveyed by upland transects and woodland point counts and a complete species list was maintained during the year. Habitat was surveyed through vegetation structure surveys, specialist surveys and fixed point photography.

Good estate wide population estimates were established for 34 bird species. The commonest species were meadow pipit, red grouse and skylark, followed by curlew and lapwing. In total, 75 bird species were recorded with data shared and stored in agreement with all partners.

Baseline data has been gathered, enabling the partnership to monitor long-term change.



Map showing distribution of curlew territories from monitoring work



Map showing distribution of skylark territories from monitoring work

As part of the monitoring programme, the project has produced breeding bird survey maps for 34 species including:

- Cuckoo
- Curlew
- Common sandpiper
- Dipper
- Grey wagtail
- Greylag goose
- Golden plover
- Kestrel
- Merlin
- Raven
- Short-eared owl
- Lapwing
- Mallard
- Teal
- Wigeon
- Meadow pipit
- Oystercatcher
- Grey partridge
- Red grouse
- Redshank
- Snipe
- Wren
- Skylark
- Wheatear

“Ben and I are very excited about this opportunity to restore and enhance this beautiful upland area and make it more species diverse and resilient, whilst benefiting the local community. As we progress with the project, we are keen to share our learning with other landowners and anyone else who might be interested.”

Nicolete Blackett-Ord, High Helbeck

Outcomes delivered for nature conservation and restoration

Project outcome 2. Increasing engagement and influencing practice within the land management and conservation sectors.

Other estate owners and managers, will feel more able to initiate the movement of their land further along a 'spectrum of wildness' and potentially develop rewilding projects, benefitting nature recovery and delivering nature based solutions. Conservation staff will feel more knowledgeable and confident what is possible in this context.

The project held two Landowner events in October 2021 and December 2021, a total of 11 Landowners/managers and Land Agents attended these events. The project feels that interest from neighbours will grow, as the habitat restoration work starts to mature, and the benefits become more evident in the landscape.



Landowner meeting at High Helbeck – October 2021

“I am working with a group of upland landowners in the North Pennines AONB who are interested in restoring and enhancing their natural capital. I found it a really useful visit (to High Helbeck) to see what the conservation bodies are interested in doing and what opportunities there are for sporting estates to improve their biodiversity. Having seen the work done at High Helbeck, I have been wondering whether there could be opportunities to plant new woodlands in suitable locations on some of these estates.”

Kate Russell, Land Agent ~ Tellus Natural Capital

In addition to these group visits targeted at land managers, there have been a series of other engagement and influencing events to interested groups:

In March 2021 ~ a partnership meeting brought together the High Helbeck owners, their land agent, the Project Officer, staff from Natural England and the AONB Biodiversity team to review the grazing management options on the estate.

In April 2021 ~ a group of AONB trainees visited High Helbeck for an introduction to the habitat restoration work.

In July 2021 ~ High Helbeck landowners hosted a barbeque at the estate office for local farmers, gamekeepers and their families. It proved a great way to meet the local community and discuss the GRCF project on the estate in an informal way.

In January 2022 ~ representatives from the Ministry of Defence, Natural England and the Eden Rivers Trust visited High Helbeck. The event showcased the restoration work that was completed and underway. The following day, there was a reciprocal visit to neighbouring MOD Warcop to discuss their own nature recovery future work programme.

In March 2022 ~ a project partners and funder day was held to look at and discuss all the activities that have been delivered through the GRCF project.



Landowner meeting at High Helbeck – December 2021

“In the Cumbrian landscape we now have many hundreds of people making changes to land through regenerative farming practices, tree or hedge planting, new wetlands and wildflowers. The project at High Helbeck is a fantastic addition to a growing network of projects which really begin to restore a concern for nature and natural systems into how we manage land.”

Pete Leeson, Partnerships Manager with the Woodland Trust

Using High Helbeck to promote and showcase nature recovery

In August 2021, High Helbeck hosted a by senior figures from DEFRA, Natural England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund plus project and organisational staff. The purpose of the day was to showcase the work that AONB partners are doing with farmers and landowners/land managers in the North Pennines. The visit illustrated the strong partnership with other organisations such as the RSPB and the Woodland Trust and the value of working closely with the landowners including their vision of promoting more nature and access on a private upland estate.

Some of the attendees on the day included:

- David Hill ~ Director General, Rural and Marine, Defra
- Helen Edmundson ~ Deputy Director, Green Finance and Green Recovery
- Marion Spain ~ Chief Executive, Natural England
- Drew Bennellick ~ Head of Landscape, NLHF
- Isobel Hunt ~ Director of Communications, NLHF
- Zelda Baveystock ~ Head of Green Recovery Challenge Fund, NLHF
- Sir John Lawton

The event demonstrated what the partnership is delivering; it proved what can be achieved for nature recovery at scale in the uplands, and showed the importance of protected landscapes. The visit stressed how more government funding is needed to do this type of nature conservation and people engagement work, to find more 'High Helbeck's', so these type of projects can help address the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.



August at High Helbeck ~ DEFRA, Natural England and NLHF visit

3.2 ~ Connecting People with Nature

Outcomes delivered for connecting people with nature

Project outcome 3. Increasing engagement and awareness amongst local communities and young people from targeted urban areas.

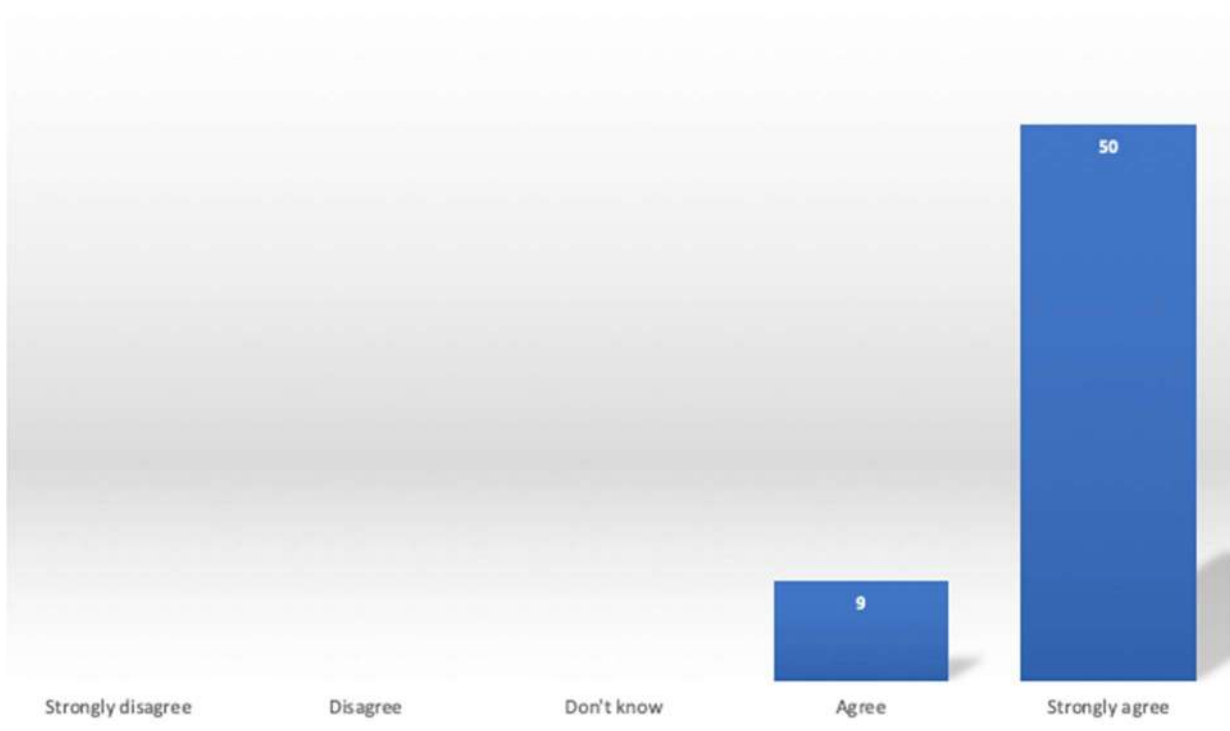
Local people gain well-being benefits from accessing the natural environment, and feel more connected to the place where they live; people's physical and mental well-being is enhanced through engagement with the project. Young people from targeted urban areas - an under-represented audience, will have had engagement with a dramatic natural environment and had an opportunity to experience the benefit this brings.

The project held 19 events for the local community and for the general public. These included guided walks, art events, bird ringing events and a botany walk. In total, 296 people attended the different public engagement events.

Given the nature of the engagement activity being short awareness raising events delivering any meaningful personal change within participants is always very unlikely. Evaluation of engagement activity was undertaken with 59 responses being collected from a range of events. Event feedback was overwhelmingly positive as shown in the responses from the following questions:

- I enjoyed this event at High Helbeck estate ~ **58 Strongly agree**, 1 Agree
- At what level do you feel the content in this event was pitched? ~ **59 About right**
- The event improved my understanding of the work being carried out ~ **50 Strongly agree**, 8 Agree

This event has improved my understanding of the work being carried out at High Helbeck estate to improve the habitats for wildlife.





Tree seed collection - volunteers and Yorkshire Dales trainees

Delivering engagement activity for young people from targeted urban areas proved to be a difficult task with the many restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic and the interruptions in schools activity away from the classroom. Of the activity with young people that did take place:

- The whole of Brough and Warcop Primary Schools totalling 160 people visited to learn about the project, they did stream dipping in the Swindale Beck and bug hunting in the meadows around the Beck.
- 14 Penrith Scouts assisted with a peat depth survey.



Penrith Scouts assisting with a Peat Depth Survey contributing to the scientific report



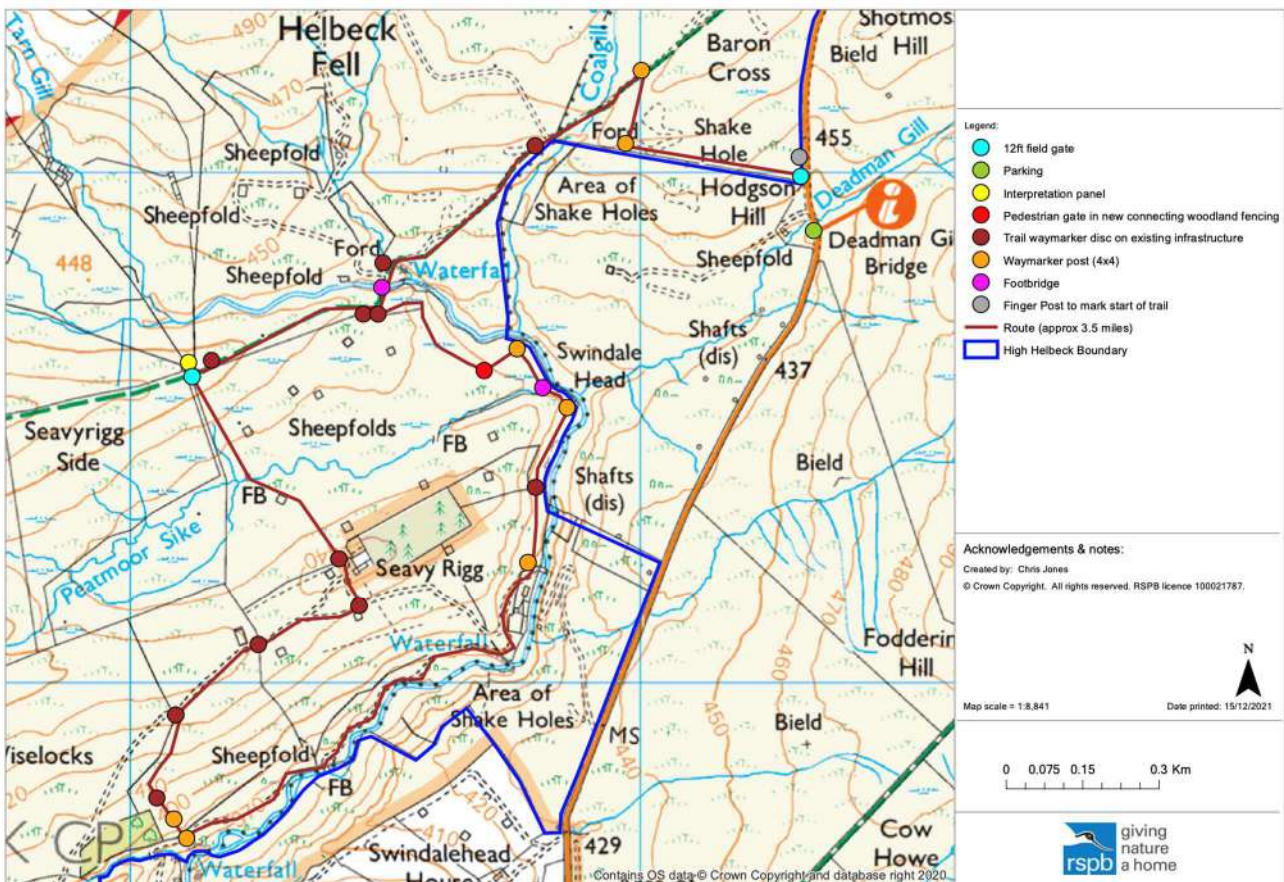
North Pennines AONB promoting a bird-ringing day



Public event, bird ringing ~ July 2021

Additional achievement and project legacy

The project has managed to lever in an additional grant of £13,582 from the *Farming in Protected Landscapes* fund, that will enable the landowners to create a new 3.5 miles visitor walk on the estate. The new route will be advertised in a launch event during Spring 2022 and the walk will be promoted and downloadable from the North Pennines AONB website.



A map showing the route of the new High Helbeck Walk

Welcome to High Helbeck

NORTH PENNINES
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



In 2021 we began a joint project with the North Pennines AONB Partnership, RSPB, Woodland Trust and Natural England on our estate.

We are now looking after this land in a way which supports more wildlife, stores more carbon, holds back floodwater, and allows better access for visitors, whilst retaining other activities which support the estate such as livestock grazing and game shooting.

This is our vision.

Ben and Nicolette Blackett-Ord

A Open wetland habitat for wading birds such as curlew, redshank, lapwing and snipe.



B Scrub and scattered trees link the valley with the higher moorland, supporting a diverse bird community including black grouse and ring ouzel.



You are here

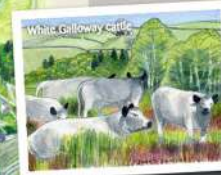
C Healthy peat, full of sphagnum mosses and other bog plants, absorbs carbon, holds water and supports wildlife.



D Low shrubs, such as upland willow species, have colonised, helping to stabilise the peatland above and providing nesting sites, food and shelter for birds and insects.



E An ever-changing mosaic of open wooded pasture, grassland, scrub and moorland, is maintained by grazing animals in low numbers, including roe deer and rabbits, alongside livestock.



This project was delivered by the North Pennines AONB Partnership (www.northpennines.org.uk), in partnership with:



Illustrations: ©Janet Seales

Funding secured by the AONB team from Defra's Green Recovery Challenge Fund allowed the project partners to kick-start a process of large-scale ecological enhancement. We restored 79 hectares of eroding peatland, created new wetlands, and seeded and planted thousands of shrubs and trees across 153 hectares.

An interpretation panel showing the project 'Vision', has been created by a local artist

3.3 ~ Resilience and Employment

Outcomes delivered for resilience and employment

Project outcome 4. Increasing heritage skills and employment opportunities.

A skilled and trained young person ready to enter employment in the sector.

Learning with High Helbeck ~ experiences of Anna Holliday, project trainee

"The whole experience has been pretty life changing, I have appreciated how wide ranging the traineeship has been and it has helped me to narrow in on what I want to do in the future."

Anna Holliday started her employment in this project on 14th April as part of a self-employed bursary payment at the Living Wage. Anna will complete her traineeship when the project finishes at the end of March 2022. Anna has been involved in many aspects of the project and she has made a key contribution with the planning and delivery of an additional cattle infrastructure project. The following reflections are selected highlights from a monthly log, kept by Anna during her traineeship.

April

My initial thoughts as the new High Helbeck trainee are of how genuine, thoughtful and kind everyone has come across. A significant part of my first few weeks at North Pennines AONB Partnership has been getting to know lots of different people from various sectors of the organisation, and everyone has been a pleasure to meet.

May

The High Helbeck bird surveys were long yet very productive days. Walking about 12 miles each day over challenging terrain, my step count during one day peaked at 28,500! However tough, these days have been rewarding and enjoyable. A highlight on the last survey was seeing over 20 Golden Plover females with 2 males altogether, they were magnificent!

June

The primary school visits over 2 days with Brough and Warcop primary schools were something I was slightly anxious about. However, the children were very enthusiastic about the wildlife on the estate and were a joy to teach.

July

A highlight of the month was the BBQ evening at Greena, a more casual gathering of landowners and farmers from the area, and a chance to get to know some I had met in passing and others I had not yet met. They know me more personally, so it has had a positive impact on our meetings.



Discussing grazing with Ruth Dalton



Constructing gabion baskets

August

The main highlight of the month for me was the NLHF and Defra visit to High Helbeck. Meeting all these interesting people at the top of their field, the day was inspiring for me. I also met the director of the North Pennines AONB and had a brief chat about my future.

Towards the end of the month we had a visit from Ruth Dalton, a conservation grazing consultant, at High Helbeck. She was very knowledgeable and we were able to pick her brains on possible conservation cattle grazing in at High Helbeck. There was even the question of myself starting my own conservation grazing herd, so that would be very exciting.

September

On the 24th we had our advisory group meeting of September - the first of our meetings where I was required to brief the group as to how part of the project had gone. It was scary to be speaking to so many people I look up to, all at once, but I delivered it clearly and concisely, and received extremely good feedback on my work.

October

The facilitation workshop was far more interesting than I had anticipated it would be, and I learnt a great deal on altering your body language and using specific words to have a more positive conversation for conflict resolution.

November

Earlier in the month, I accompanied RSPB Nicola Evans in moving her conservation grazing fell ponies from one location to another, in the Swindale Valley, near Shap. I was able to quiz her on managing a conservation grazing herd and help her move her ponies.

December

At the start of the month, I joined my colleagues on a visit to RSPB Wild Haweswater. During this visit, we had a guided tour of their tree and wildflower nursery. It was interesting to see what precautions they take to safely rear at risk priority species, such as Juniper trees.

Towards the end of the project Anna was applying for Conservation Officer roles in the land management and conservation sector and in March 2022 **was appointed as a Farming and Conservation Officer with the Eden Rivers Trust.**

Outcomes delivered for resilience and employment

Project outcome 5. Supporting project partners, local contractors and other businesses to benefit directly through the Green Recovery Programme.

NGO partners are further supported through the COVID 19 crisis with longer-term resilience derived from the new partnership and relationships building developed through the project work.

The partnership working of the project has been one of its true strengths weaving through all the activity that has been delivered, and has demonstrated mutual support across the full breadth of GRCF activity during the High Helbeck project.

From the outset, the partners were keen to purchase locally and support local businesses as much as possible. By end of project, £190,000 (40%) of capital works were undertaken by local contractors within 25 miles of the project, and £365,820 (78%) were within 50 miles of the project. Through the project, strong links have been made with contractors who now feel personally invested in the project and its outputs.

“These challenges made the completion of the work extremely satisfying for myself and our team. It only happened as the support we received from Chris and the team was first class, resolving issues and finding solutions to ensure we could keep working safely and efficiently.”

Tree planting contractor

“I have found the High Helbeck project to be truly inspirational, to see a large landowner working with such a wide array of conservation organisations and specialists, whilst maintaining a tenanted grazing system, is a model that hopefully others will follow. The project staff have been a pleasure to work with, with clear goals and a sensitivity to the different interests in grazing the land. I look forward to seeing how the project develops into the future.”

Ruth Dalton, conservation grazing consultant to the project

“The actual delivery of the work was also a logistics nightmare (which I love). The mix of working round a very wet and exposed and unforgiving site that is often too cold and windy to work during winter, shifting around 4 artic lorry loads of materials over sensitive ground, along with a busy shooting and farming estate that requires shoot days where we don't enter the site, then the final hurdle of half the site being located on a military firing range, with bomb disposal teams checking the land for unexploded artillery rounds before we knock fence posts into the ground. All this In the middle of a pandemic!”

Fencing contractor working at High Helbeck

3.4 ~ Additional project outcomes

Additional outcomes delivered

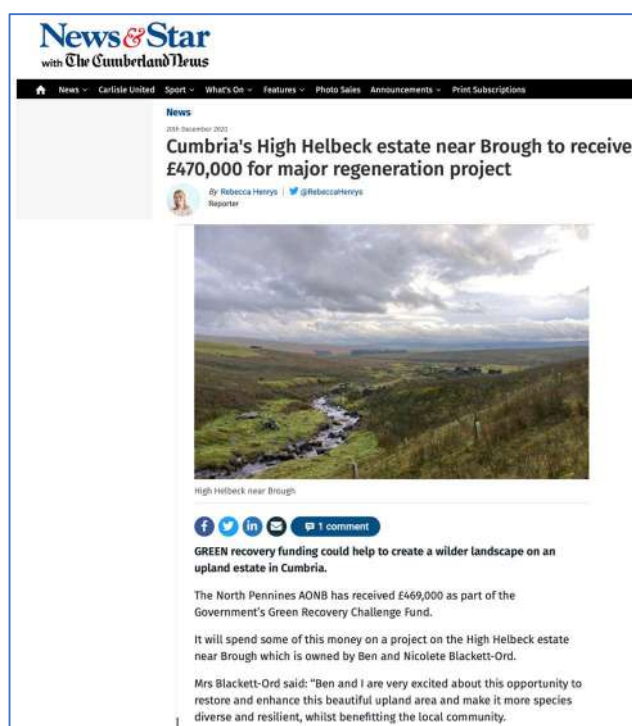
Project outcome 6. High Helbeck is a project that is well managed, with an effective project team and communications activity steered by a strong partnership of Advisory Group members.

Continual feedback from a wider network of stakeholders will be incorporated in activity to deliver a value for money investment for NLHF as part of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.

The partnership has shown how, with good ambition and co-ordination, a group comprising private landowners, the RSPB, The Woodland Trust, Natural England and the AONB team can come together to great effect and achieve excellent outputs. Project recording has been comprehensive and exemplary with:

- The High Helbeck Project Advisory Group held 14 monthly meetings. They elected to hold more frequent meeting rather than quarterly due to the short timeframe of the project and the number of things to agree and discuss on a regular basis. The transition to online meeting platforms helped facilitate this activity
- The Project Partnership plans to meet post the GRCF project to keep supporting the landowners and to help develop the estate further
- To track progress with outputs, the project maintained a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework spreadsheet, and made quarterly progress reports and financial claims to NLHF
- A record of contractors working on the project has enabled the group to report on how far from the project area their contractors and suppliers are based. This has helped to demonstrate the importance of the project to local suppliers.
- Demonstrating project legacy through the development of a vision document for High Helbeck that sets out future ambitions on behalf of the partnership and considers; landscape and nature; natural processes and public goods; people and economic activity

The project has had a strong on-line presence, and the award of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund was well promoted on social media and in the local paper:



Project announcement on twitter and in the local paper

High Helbeck ~ Questions & Answers

Further evidence of partnership best practice and for High Helbeck being a well-managed project is in the development of a comprehensive Q&A document that addressed 20 different questions relating to the project and included selected project questions such as:

- *What is the High Helbeck project?*
- *How much is the grant from Defra? What has the grant be spent on?*
- *The Green Recovery Challenge Fund was partly about creating jobs. How many were created and what did they do?*
- *How will the work on the estate continue beyond the GRCF funding period?*
- *What are the main benefits of the work? Will you be monitoring the impacts of the work?*
- *You've received lot of public money ~ can the public see what's happening here?*

Pus selected land management questions:

- *Why are you planting trees when they could regenerate naturally?*
- *What's the balance between natural regeneration and planting?*
- *What about all those plastic tubes and their environmental impact?*
- *There will still be some shooting on the estate – is this compatible with rewilding or managing the land for nature?*
- *There is still some predator control though isn't there?*
- *Do you aim to influence other landowners?*

4. Observations, learning and programme improvements

The High Helbeck project set out an ambitious programme of habitat conservation, community engagement and monitoring, over a 15-month period. Through excellent partnership, shared ambition, engagement of local contractors and effective use of skilled staff the project can demonstrate delivery against the three strategic monitoring requirements of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The most significant external challenge was the coronavirus pandemic, despite which the project managed to deliver the majority of the intended engagement and volunteering activity. This is testament to the tenacity of the group and the cohesion of the partnership.

A substantial amount of conservation and nature recovery work has been delivered; neighbouring land managers and local conservation staff have been engaged with and feel connected with the project and have already been inspired to look differently at their own land that could trigger even more substantial landscape change at-scale.

The local community of landowners, contractors, young people, and locals are aware of the project, and many feel personally invested in the outcomes that have been delivered. The events and activities have given opportunities to visit and to engage directly with the project and the wildlife of the estate.

The project will deliver a significant legacy with all partners contributing to the development of a vision document for High Helbeck that sets out future ambitions on behalf of the partnership and considers; landscape and nature; natural processes and public goods; people and economic activity.

A draft copy of the full document can be seen in **Appendix 2**. As an additional legacy, a new walk around the estate has been established, opening-up access in a way that was not possible prior to GRCF funding. With more lead in time and a longer period of work, the partnership feels they could have delivered with even greater effect, as reflected in the following reflections and project learning collected from members of the High Helbeck Advisory Group.

4.1 ~ Project reflections and learning

In February 2022, the Advisory Group member discussed their individual perspectives on the project. The comments that follow were collected from that conversation and have been grouped into five main learning points and themes to emerge from this GRCF project activity:

- Partnership
- Building relationships
- New land management approaches and sharing expertise
- The importance of lead-in time
- The importance of good resourcing and legacy funding

Partnership

- *Partnership working has been an absolute joy, and so collaborative. It has built strong relationships in this group, and it is changing the way we are operating in other projects elsewhere.*
- *It's been great to have been able to deliver something ambitious in such a short time. We've built a strong partnership that will extend well beyond the life of the project.*

- *This has been an inspiring partnership, built on trust and respect; it's been a joy to be part of. Coming into the project, and knowing that the landowners held this vision, was amazing. It's been humbling and inspires us to want to do more.*
- *The partnership's been a dream! We've delivered, and we're very close to delivering what we said we would. That's down to people being so adaptable and positive.*
- *It's been hugely valuable to have a dedicated project officer to drive the project forward, and an experienced chair for the group, to keep an eye on and progress the project, organise the meetings and other project activity.*
- *We've had a lot of support from Natural England, whose staff have known this estate well for 20 years and so as a partnership we understand a lot about where we can do positive things for nature, prioritising the carbon gains of restoring vital peatlands while also focusing on tree planting and natural regeneration in the right places.*

Building relationships

- *Working with landowners such as Ben and Nicolette on this project has been amazing – particularly within the context of the surrounding grouse moor land-use.*
- *We (RSPB) have now created a new post to do more of this sort of work: a Conservation Adviser, specifically for building relationships with grouse moor managers. They have been appointed, and their first day will be a visit to High Helbeck!*
- *I'd like to give credit to the commitment of this great team of people.*
- *I've really valued the collaboration in this group, and everyone's flexibility. Everyone has understood that this is all going to be long-term; it will go well beyond the 15 months. I hadn't expected that so many on the group would be so understanding of our (landowner) view, and so helpful. It would not have worked so well without Chris' commitment throughout!*
- *It's been great to be able to have such honest conversations.*
- *The complexity of the project needs to be recognised and everyone in this team gets that.*
- *We [the landowners] enjoy working with the AONB team, the Woodland Trust and the RSPB to develop ideas together. We want to balance supporting nature recovery with traditional management for livestock and some shooting.*

New land management approaches and sharing expertise

- *The project has given us an excellent opportunity to trial new things, like the assisted natural regeneration and seed collection work. It'll be fascinating to see how it works.*
- *There are so many skills and so much experience around the table, and the expertise that RSPB and The Woodland Trust have been invaluable. Meeting on-line has actually worked well, and has enabled us to meet more regularly, than we might otherwise have done.*
- *On the back of this project, we are now planning two new landscape recovery bids – inspired by this success.*
- *It's been useful to have such a flexible scheme, compared with the usual (land management) schemes available for this work – we've been able to be more creative.*

- *We need landscape-scale action. This is an exemplar of how to achieve this with multiple partners. What's been different from other, similar projects, is the grouse moor context. This is exactly the sort of project we need to be working in.*

The importance of lead-in time

- *It would have been good to have had more lead-in and planning time, so we had a clear vision at the outset.*
- *We have been so much stronger together, and I'd like us to be able to work together again. The project was meant to be 'oven-ready', but really it needed to be more prepared.*
- *We have loads of contacts across this landscape, but these projects are rarely 'oven-ready'. We managed to get a really good contractor, so we got a really good chunk of contractor time. We might not have been so lucky. **So, more lead in would be helpful. Oven-ready for these type of projects doesn't really exist.***
- *I share comments about the lead-in time. We have been able to work it out on the ground, but it would be better to be able to work it out in advance.*
- *We could have done with more lead in time.*

The importance of good resourcing and legacy funding

- *These are long-term projects. It's therefore crucial to fully engage with family-owned estates and holdings.*
- ***A lesson for DEFRA is that we [AONB] need to be paid to do this project management work; it's been an additional workload, that DEFRA needs to fund.***
- *We've been able to do lots of things we always wanted to do, and the project has provided the money to do it. It's good to have Government recognition of what we can achieve.*
- *It's important to recognise the value of including training opportunities.*
- *Government needs to know that land management is not a quick fix, and that it goes beyond one's own lifetime.*
- ***There's no legacy funding for ongoing care and management of trees ~ something that really needs to be robust over 15 years.***

"We've built a really good partnership for this work and have an excellent relationship with the landowners with whom we share the ambition to promote natural processes to achieve a wilder and more climate resilient landscape."

Andy Lees, North Pennines AONB Partnership

4.2 ~ Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme feedback and recommended improvements

There was much that the GRCF programme got right, providing additional investment in nature conservation and people engagement activity and the flexibility of the funding in being able to cover 100% of the implementation costs as highlighted in the success of the tree planting and woodland creation programme has been welcomed. Other feedback gathered through the evaluation relating to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund programme and for use as part of the overall evaluation that is being undertaken by ICF includes the following three key inter-related points that would be the main recommendations to emerge from this evaluation report.

- **A compressed application period and timetable** ~ It was noted that the project application submitted as part of the GRCF was an excellent example of intended activity with clear outputs and outcomes that helped set the framework for the project evaluation and everything that has been delivered by the partners.

The quality of the application as submitted **was in spite of rather than because of the application timetable**, the project came together in a very short space of time and as noted by feedback from the Advisory Group **“more lead in time would have been helpful”** and **“oven ready does not really exist”**.

“This is not the way to build capacity and capital for long term nature recovery projects, having short compressed application periods is not sustainable to gather the right expertise and partners particularly for small organisations.”

- **Building in full cost recovery for all project partners** ~ Whilst this funding programme enabled voluntary sector partners such as the Woodland Trust and the RSPB to recover their staff contributions as part of the project cost the North Pennines AONB as the lead partner was unable to recover their costs contributed to the scheme. As a small publicly funded organisation this places the AONB at a disadvantage compared to larger national charities and leads to an opportunity cost for the organisation in taking on this type of work as development and management resource allocated to this project has been unable to be focussed elsewhere.
- **Management and maintenance funding** ~ Provision of management and maintenance funding is an important component of any project, particularly for any nature conservation and recovery programmes. For High Helbeck there has been an investment in the landscape and species recovery over a 15 month period but projects of this type needs to be able to access further support for ongoing management and maintenance within the original programme design to help protect the gains that have already been delivered.

This evaluation can demonstrate that High Helbeck has been an excellent project that has delivered significant benefits for nature recovery, connecting people with nature as well as outcomes for resilience and employment. There is a commitment to securing the project legacy through management and maintenance commitments as well as allowing for the development of a vision document for the estate that will be a guide for further activity and securing additional resources.

In a short space of time High Helbeck has become an exemplar for conservation land management and local engagement in the uplands with the work becoming a showcase for national funders and policy makers as well as influencing practice of regional and local land managers and conservation staff and the work of everyone who has contributing to making the project an undoubted success should be recognised and applauded.



AONB trainees and RSPB staff removing redundant partridge pens and Wych Elm seedling found at High Helbeck

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my thanks to Chris Jones, Anna Holliday and all the other members of the High Helbeck Advisory Group who I have worked with over the last fifteen months who have provided the information and insight that enabled this evaluation to be completed. Collection of the information contained within the report has been conducted remotely during the Coronavirus pandemic during February and March 2022, so any errors and misinterpretations are in good faith and remain my responsibility.

Simon Lees, Countryside Training Partnership, March 2022

Appendix 1: High Helbeck ~ Fixed Point Photography Information

Project aim:

To take 15 standard digital photographs from a pre-determined network of fixed points across the High Helbeck Estate. Please see separate spreadsheet with grid references and descriptions together with a location map.

Then return at intervals (at least annually) to take photographs at the same points with the same view in order to help monitor and demonstrate the outcomes from the project, such as tree growth and vegetation change.

What is Fixed Point Photography?

Fixed Point Photography (FPP) is an effective and easy method of recording and monitoring visual changes within the landscape. It involves taking a photograph, from the same point, at intervals over a period of time.

Proposed method:

The pre-determined fixed-point locations (already recorded by a grid reference) should ideally be marked on the ground by a post or similar to aid consistency of the photos. In some cases, this might not be necessary due to an obvious existing reference such as a bridge or a strainer post. In addition to the grid reference, a general compass direction is provided, however this is just a guide and the photographer should also use the photos description to guide them. The photographer can use a phone camera to take these photos if they prefer.

Timescale for project:

All photos should be sent via email to the landowners (Ben & Nicolette Blackett-Ord). The first set of photos **must be taken by mid March 2022** for the purposes of the Green Recovery Fund Project. Afterwards, photos to be taken in early to mid August every year when trees are in full leaf. The contractor will continue to take photographs at these set points every August, providing a valuable documented record of the landscape change over time.

Number	Grid References	General Compass Direction	Fixed Point Photography Location Description
1	NY 81594 18793	South East	Inside Connecting Wood boundary looking downstream
2	NY 81669 18687	North East	Bare alder planting
3	NY 81600 18805	South East	Looking down either side of Connecting Woodland fence line to illustrate possible vegetation change
4	NY 81576 18810	South West	Standing by Connecting Woodland fence line looking towards Parliament Square
5	NY 81474 18784	West	Looking upstream from new footbridge
6	NY 81107 18624	North West	Parliament Square looking towards Tarn Gill
7	NY 80579 18944	North West	By MOD warning sign looking up Doak Sike cage planting
8	NY 80505 19346	North West	Tarn Gill cage planting view point from rock at edge of the fencing
9	NY 81518 19333	South	Willow pegs from concrete pipe looking south
10	NY 81847 18132	South West	Looking downstream along Swindale Beck from the track by the small parking area with tubed trees in the foreground
11	NY 80911 19287	TBC by photographer	Unplanted 10x10m fenced area, to demonstrate vegetation recovery on land excluded from grazing
12	NY 81833 17983	North West	Area of willow pegging and scattered tubed planting in Assisted Natural Regeneration Area
13	NY 82878 20281	South East	20x20 fenced area with tubed planting at Ley Seats
14	NY 82502 20261	North	Landscape photo to demonstrate impact on the wider work on Ley Seats
15	NY 81501 18812	TBC by photographer	Close up to show cactus cages in action

Record of FPP locations

Appendix 2: ~ A Vision for High Helbeck

1. Context
2. **Vision**
 - a. Landscape and nature
 - b. Natural processes and public goods
 - c. People
 - d. Economic activity

1. Context

High Helbeck is 1000 ha of upland shooting estate in the North Pennines AONB, close to Brough on its southern border. In 2019 the current owners took full management control of the estate and started to look at how the estate could be run in a way which supported more wildlife and better public access, alongside its use for game shooting and other activities.

The subsequent partnership with the North Pennines AONB Partnership staff team, RSPB and the Woodland Trust, and advice from Natural England, led to a Green Recovery Challenge Fund bid by the AONB team to begin a process of ecological restoration during 2021.

The funding allowed for the restoration of the peatland on higher ground, creation of scrapes on ground where waders were known to congregate and a major project to accelerate the regeneration of scrub and tree cover throughout the estate using planting, assisted natural regeneration and changes to the grazing regime.

The funding was also vital in securing a partnership which may otherwise never have come together. All the partners are now committed to working together beyond the current funding to continue to help the estate on its journey, and this vision has been co-created by all the partners in order to help guide that journey.

2. Vision

High Helbeck is an upland estate...

...where the restoration of nature and natural processes are key goals

...where, with appropriate support, other activities such as livestock production, tourism or shooting can be aligned with these goals.

...where multiple public goods such as carbon storage and sequestration, natural flood management and increasing biodiversity are all delivered by our management.

...which provides opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to engage with nature and our landscape, and where local people understand and support our work.

...within a supportive partnership, all of whose members are keen to learn, respectful of other viewpoints and ready to adapt.

...which will become an exemplar of good practice for upland land management.

2a. ~ Landscape and nature

The High Helbeck landscape will have a more varied structure and habitat composition, in particular with more native broadleaved trees and in woodlands, riparian zones or as scrub than it does now. The SSSI ancient woodlands of Swindale and Helbeck will be extended up the gills towards the peatland on the moorland top, providing a continuous but changing habitat of open wood, scrub and scattered trees and shrubs.

The peatland on the moorland top will be full of a variety of actively growing sphagnum mosses and other bog plants, and shrubs like eared and tea-leaved willows will be colonising below the peatland line.

A variety of grazing animals will maintain this mosaic of open wooded pasture, grassland, scrub and moorland, including some of the naturally present roe deer, alongside farmed sheep and native cattle.

The mosaic of habitats will support a more diverse community of insects, mammals and breeding birds reflecting the dynamic management regime put in place. The focus will be on creating a mosaic of habitats where a wide range of species can thrive. Bees, butterflies and other insects will thrive on flower-rich grasslands and woodland glades. Waders such as lapwing, redshank and snipe will find good feeding areas and breeding habitat in the wet, open and flat ground where additional habitat creation such as scrapes will benefit them. The estate will retain its high densities of curlew and continue to provide rich and varied habitat for this species, which is currently one of the bird species of highest conservation concern in the UK.

Habitat diversity and a mosaic of scrubby woodland, moorland edge and bog will allow black grouse to thrive and increase in number to reinstate High Helbeck as an important black grouse lekking site. Raptor numbers will increase as changes in habitat management increase their food source and the estate will be a safe valuable nesting area for a mix of species. The existing and new woodland will support a variety of edge, scrub and woodland species, changing as the habitat develops but providing a rich addition to the bird community of High Helbeck.

Baseline monitoring of birds and vegetation and repeat surveys will allow us to measure change and evaluate the response of biodiversity to a changing management regime.

Our vision is landscape-scale and extends beyond High Helbeck. We will look beyond the boundaries of the estate and seek opportunities to connect with other landowners close by to communicate our vision and support others looking to do similar work.

2b. ~ Natural processes and public goods

The restoration of natural processes will drive this change in the landscape and in the abundance and diversity of wildlife. In turn the restoration of nature will provide multiple public goods.

By restoration of natural processes, we mean:

A more natural hydrology

- including restoring blanket bog - through the blocking of grips, restoring bare peat – and reducing bankside grazing pressure along becks
- by slowing the flow of water in gills and across the land through increased vegetation cover, scrub and trees (increased 'roughness')

- by maintaining moisture balance through rain capture, transpiration and absorption by trees and scrub

A more natural species composition

- by introducing or encouraging tree and shrub species to move higher up the fellside, and by considering enhancements to new woodland vegetation using local seed sources, over time
- recognising the important ecological function provided by predators and ensuring that decisions about predator control and intensity are informed by knowledge of predator levels and their impact and recognising that these decisions will be aided by joint work with neighbouring land managers
- by considering the introduction of species which have been lost from the landscape and which can have a large influence on population dynamics, including beaver

A more natural vegetation control

- by reducing the numbers of grazing sheep
- by introducing a more varied grazing herd, including heritage breed cattle and ponies as well as the naturally present deer
- controlling deer numbers in the absence of natural predators
- managing stock numbers to develop a dynamic landscape of blanket bog, grassland, heathland, woodland and scrub
- not burning heather on peat soils but cutting where this would aid habitat restoration.

By public goods we mean:

- carbon storage in trees, and in peat and other soils
- carbon sequestration through restoration of active blanket bogs, through an increase in tree cover, and through an increase in biomass above and below ground
- natural flood management through an increased 'roughness' of the vegetation cover – more trees and scrub slows water running off the fell and can help flatten out flood peaks
- managing (reducing peak) water temperature via stream shading
- increased biodiversity through the increased heterogeneity of vegetation
- cultural heritage such as field houses, bields, dry stone walls and other agricultural ruins
- landscape quality and character – a diverse landscape, with a greater sense of naturalness, that provides beauty and inspiration

2c. ~ People

More, and more diverse, people will learn from, be inspired by, and enjoy this landscape.

More permissive routes, permissive access land and new and existing dedicated Rights of Way will provide more and better ways to responsibly explore the landscape.

Information and interpretation will be available and accessible to a wide range of users and will encourage a profound understanding of the landscape from deep time to the present day, and from the landscape view to the microscopic detail.

Guided events will welcome people onto the estate to encourage further exploration and to reinforce messages about responsible access.

Schools will be using the estate as part of curricular and extra-curricular activities

Specialist interest groups, such as botanists, entomologists, climate scientists and artists will be encouraged to use the estate for their activities, with a view to developing long-term relationships which are beneficial for users and to guide the estate management.

The estate will have a multi-purpose, zero environmental-impact building to accommodate school groups, interest groups and visiting parties for education and study, as well for shoot lunches, also providing sanitation and catering facilities on site.

The Estate will continue to be a good neighbour, engaging with adjoining landowners and communicating the vision for the site. Local graziers will understand the direction the Estate is heading and why and how they can play a role.

2d. ~ Economic activity

The finances of the estate underpin the landowner's ability to deliver this vision, and the economy of the estate is now changing, from one dominated by shooting, to a mixed economy with a range of activities which are consistent with our vision, including:

- red grouse shooting when numbers permit sustainability
- mixed walked-up shooting
- clay shoots
- deer stalking
- gun dog training days
- grazing by livestock
- free-range meat sales
- low level camping/glamping
- holiday lets
- coppicing / coppice products
- payments for provision of public goods, including carbon storage and sequestration, natural flood management, improved access, and increasing biodiversity.

Partnership and learning

A legacy of the funded project is a rich dataset for birds and habitat which will be shared and appropriately stored at the Cumbria Records Centre, enabling the landowners and partners to draw on the information in years to come. Data will be used to monitor change and inform land management decisions.

Communication of our learning at High Helbeck will form an ongoing part of the Partnership's work.