

Charity Commission Report: May2024 – May2025

Purposes of the Charity

To promote for the benefit of the public, the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Clara Vale and its surrounding area including the the promotion of environmental diversity and contribution towards conservation work nationally To advance the education of the public in the conservation and protection of the physical and natural environment.

Main Activities

Management of the Clara Vale Local Nature reserve to maintain and Improve biodiversity.

Allow and encourage public access to the Nature Reserve to observe its wildlife Through the Nature Club, provide an opportunity for children and their parents or carers to experience and explore the natural environment.

Management of the Clara Vale Community Orchard.

This, we believe, conforms to the Commissions guidance on public benefit, PB1. The Nature Reserve and Community Orchard are freely open to the public at all times.

Contribution made by Volunteers

The Conservation Group is entirely dependent on volunteers to care for the Nature Reserve, the Community Orchard and run the Nature Club. There are no paid employees.

For the period of this report voluneers have given a total of 142 days days of their time to running the Conservation Group.

An approximate breakdown is as follows:

Managing the nature reserve: 59 days

Managing the Community Orchard: 47 days

Running the Nature Club: 18 days.

Administration 18 days

This is likely to be an underestimate as volunteers contribute to the Conservation group in ways they do not think is volunteering such as talking to other agencies, producing notices for events, advertising activities on social media etc.

We are very grateful for the many hours volunteers have given to the Group, which, for a small village, is exceptional.

Governance document.

Constitution adopted 10th June 2024

How the charity is constituted

Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Trustee selection method.

Trustees are appointed or reappointed at the AGM in June and at other times as required.

Our main achievements and activities May 2024–2025

The Reserve continues to be a haven for wildlife compared to the intensively farmed fields surrounding us. And we continue to receive appreciative comments about it as a place to enjoy nature.

The wildlife in the reserve appears to have followed national trends which, sadly, is a decline in biodiversity, with a few exceptions.

Flora

There is lots of “Nature” in the Reserve. One of the reasons it is of value is because of the variety of plants it contains in such a small area. The Reserve is only about 9 acres there are around 200 different flowering plants. There are also mosses, fungi and lichens which we have yet to identify. Cutting the meadow areas and controlling the scrub is how we maintain this diversity.

Without this management the reserve would by now be mostly scrub and woodland . Apart from the group’ s management, the variety of plants comes about from the mix of habitats, and that it has never had herbicides or fertiliser spread on it

Small pockets of grassland and scrub survived the 70+ years it was the site of a coal mine, enough to seed much of what is there now. Today, were it not a Local Nature Reserve, it's likely it would be classified as a brownfield site, ripe for development.

There's nothing particularly rare on the reserve but it is rich assembly of plants, probably one of the best in Gateshead Borough.

Birds

There are 37 nest boxes in the reserve. We put them up to attract tree sparrows, a bird that has declined nationally by 93% since 2008. This was very successful with around 600 nestlings ringed between 2016 and 2022. In 2023 there was a crash in numbers and only three boxes were used. In 2024 only one box was used and it was unsuccessful the young were found dead in the nestbox. This year no boxes have been used by tree sparrows. And they have been rarely seen or heard. Bird flu could be a cause, If so as the numbers hopefully will recover we will see them using the boxes again. The big decline in insect numbers is also a likely cause. with not enough young birds surviving to maintain the population.

Tree sparrows mostly eat seeds but they feed their young on insects. If that's what's behind the crash in numbers, it could be a long time before we see tree sparrows back in the Reserve

Last year the boxes were taken over by blue tits and great tits. Blue tits used 12 of the boxes and raised 42 chicks. Great tits used 7 of the boxes and raised 18 chicks. We'll have to wait to see what the coming year brings but so far it is not looking promising.

Apart from monitoring the nest boxes, the Northumbria Ringing Group visits monthly between November and April over the winter months demonstrating to the public what ringing birds involves and why it is undertaken. This is a very popular activity giving visitors the opportunity to see birds that have been captured close up. The Group ringed 263 new birds last year. Blue tits were the most frequently caught at 80 followed by great tits (34) and goldfinches. The least were magpie, long tailed tit, reed bunting and goldcrest, 1 each. Many thanks to the Northumbria Ringing Group for all the work put in to monitoring the nest boxes and particularly the ringing sessions over the winter months.

Two newish bird arrivals to the reserve this year are harlequin duck, a pair used the pond in the feeding station, and ring-necked parakeet. Both nest in holes in trees, and were probably looking for somewhere suitable. Neither have bred here yet. Some residents have had the bright green parakeets on their garden bird feeders. There is concern that they are a threat to native species like woodpeckers by displacing them from their nest holes, but so far there is only limited evidence for this.

Bird migration this year has been slow and some species such as swallows and willow warblers numbers appear to be below average.

The swift boxes under the eaves of the village hall, have so far failed to attract swifts but are much appreciated by house sparrows and jackdaws.

The tawny owl box that's visible from the Alex West hide has been replaced but was quickly taken over by a pair of jackdaws. It was put up late in the season so we're hoping it might be used by a tawny next year.

Insects

Butterflies and moths

2024 was one of the worst years on record for butterflies in the UK and we weren't spared here. Small tortoiseshells, normally one of the commonest butterflies was very scarce. The wet spring and cool summer were the main factors, along with pesticide use, habitat destruction and climate change. 39 of the 57 resident species in the UK are in decline.

The Reserve holds 16 resident species of butterfly plus red admiral and painted lady which migrate here. We've lost a couple of species over the past few years: dingy skipper and wall butterfly. 16 out of 51 species is a decent total for such a small reserve and is no doubt due to the mix of habitats and plants

Whilst there are only 57 resident species of butterfly in the UK, there 2500 species of moths.

Moth trapping has been undertaken in the reserve over last year and 150 different species have been recorded.

Moths have some unexpected names: Green Carpet, Snout, Dingy Footman, Ingrailed Clay, Setaceous Hebrew Character, Flounced Rustic, to name but a few

We plan to organise a moth trapping demonstration over the summer/autumn.

Mammals.

The wild mammals in the reserve are less visible. Grey squirrels, brown rats, and roe deer are perhaps the most likely to be seen. Rabbit numbers fluctuate due to myxomatosis but there are usually a few around. There is evidence of badgers digging beside the paths in the reserve. And of course there's plenty of evidence of moles. Foxes are present but perhaps not as common as in the past. Maybe they have become urban foxes. Stoats and weasels have been spotted from the hides.

Four species of bat are present: Common and Soprano pipistrelle, Noctule and Daubenton's. We hope to organise a bat walk later in the year.

Amphibians

Frogs have never been common in the Reserve. Most years only small amounts of frog spawn is it be found. Toads are more common and in the late summer there can be hundreds of toadlets wandering around the reserve. We're really not sure why there is this difference.

There are smooth newts in the Reserve ponds but no great crested.

Management of the reserve by means of coppicing, scything and scrub control will continue. Many thanks to the volunteers who helped with this, in all weathers, throughout the year.

Without their help the Reserve would not display the biodiversity it does today.

The Nature Club

We've had another successful year of monthly Nature Club sessions for village children aged 4-11. The number of children attending sessions has averaged 8. Over the year 17 village children have joined for one or more sessions.

Topics covered in Nature Club sessions have included: exploring minibeasts and their

habitats, pond dipping, seed dispersal, apple day activities in the village hall and in the orchard, Gruffalo trails, making Christmas wreaths, the RSPB bird count, signs of spring, parts of a tree and leaf shapes. Each session has its own structure but we always gather together in a circle to welcome everyone and to sit quietly together at the end, sharing some of our findings and listening to a poem or reading a story. During the session there is often a nature trail or a spotter sheet to complete. Children no longer race off to finish first but take their time, observing details and taking care to step gently with respect for the animals and plants in the reserve. There is usually a creative activity using natural materials or children record their observations in their nature journals.

The Nature Club leaders plan sessions for a few months ahead. Although we have a plan for each session one of our principles is that we are flexible and respond to what is happening in nature around us or when children come up with their own ideas. In December, huddled around the Kelly Kettle drinking hot chocolate, we had a spontaneous review with both parents and children sharing their highlights of the year.

Another essential principle is to give time for children to engage in activities at their own pace. Some of the group might move on to the next activity while one or two children will still be engrossed in their work and wish to continue without interruption.

Parental engagement continues to be an integral element of nature club with children and

parents engaging in the tasks together. In this way children and parents learn together, e.g. parents might use the wildlife guide to identify a flower then support their child to look closely at the flower parts, counting the petals and checking the leaf shape to decide together if this is their specimen. On one memorable day, children chose one of the soft toy birds and headed off with their parents to make a nest for their bird. Parents also enjoy the creative activities working alongside their children. Observing this, it feels as if this is precious time for families to spend together.

A new development this year has been to sometimes run Nature Club on the same day as a Conservation Group task day. Children have observed volunteers scything and coppicing and creating a dead-hedge to deter deer from eating away at the coppiced trees. Members of the conservation group have answered children's questions and explained how and why the reserve needs to be managed. When we established the nature club, we envisaged that children might themselves become conservationists in the future. Being actively involved in conservation tasks from a young age will hopefully ensure some of them become tomorrow's conservation volunteers.

We have recently introduced the Green Tree Badge, run by the Royal Forestry Society. The aim is to help children learn more about the amazing world of trees and forestry. We will incorporate activities into Nature Club sessions. When children have completed at least eight activities (we may do more), they will receive a Green Tree Badge to sew on to a jacket.

Clara Vale Nature Club is thriving. In so doing it provides opportunities for children and their parents to engage with nature and learn how they can play their part in caring for the environment.

The Community Orchard

The orchard theme this last year have been about stability and the consolidation of the new membership system and natural environments, along with community favourites events like Apple Day.

1. The new online membership system with card payments and membership reminders has been a success with everyone commenting on how easy the new system is to use, and improving our online records management including data retention management and new ways to communicate with members and potential volunteers. We now have 39 registered members.
2. Apple Day was a huge success with favourite activities like apple juicing, apple fritters and tea and cake in the Hall being enjoyed by all. It was great to see so many people and families chatting, socialising and having fun in the autumn sunshine with more than one person commenting to me after the event about the community feel as everyone contributed what they could to make the juice. The highlight was a musical parade with the village children from the Village Hall to the Community Orchard.
3. Following a risk assessment after the new orchard pond iced over, we undertook some risk remediation work to reduce the depth of the pond to a safe depth to allow easy egress, and this work also improved the underwater habitat.
4. The new orchard pond showed early Spring signs of amphibian life with many smooth newts, some frogs and a few great crested newts.
5. Management tasks included regular strimming of the paths to allow safe and easy access, bulb planting and hedge trimming.
6. In 2026 we are looking to plant some new trees to increase crop variety and biodiversity, perhaps nut trees.

Finally, here is some feedback from a local resident about the orchard:

“I just wanted to message and say I have lived in this village since I was younger than 2, on and off with moves and travels. I grew up around the community orchard playing and passing through. Today I went for the first time in years and I must say it’s absolutely gorgeous! Everyone has done an AMAZING job it not only keeps all my

childhood memories but also has improved massively. The pond - incredible, the little walk from the path into the woodland bit it's so well kept!

My family buried my pet rabbit down there when I was a little girl and it just warmed my heart today going down."



CHARITY COMMISSION
FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

Charity Name LARA VALE CONSERVATION GROUP	No (if any)
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Receipts and payments accounts

CC16a

For the period from	4 May 2024	To	12 May 2025
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Section A Receipts and payments

	Unrestricted funds to the nearest £	Restricted funds to the nearest £	Endowment funds to the nearest £	Total funds to the nearest £	Last year to the nearest £
A1 Receipts					
Private donations	4,246	-	-	4,246	-
Orchard membership	339	-	-	339	-
Apple day	273	-	-	273	-
Garden bird watch	20	-	-	20	-
Orchard donation	50	-	-	50	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
<i>AR)</i>	4,928	-	-	4,928	-
sales, (see table).					
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Sub total</i>	-	-	-	-	-
Total receipts	4,928	-	-	4,928	-

A3 Payments

Insurance	277	-	-	277	-
Bird food	597	-	-	597	-
Equipment	492	-	-	492	-
Administration	61	-	-	61	-
Tree certificates	20	-	-	20	-
Nature club	57	-	-	57	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-

<i>Sub total</i>	1,504	-	-	1,504	-
A4 Asset and investment					
	-	-	-	-	
	-	-	-	-	
<i>Sub total</i>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Total payments</i>	1,504	-	-	1,504	-
<i>Net of receipts/(payments)</i>	3,424	-	-	3,424	-
A5 Transfers between funds	-	-	-	-	-
A6 Cash funds last year end	4,561	-	-		-
<i>Cash funds this year end</i>	7,985		-		-

Section B Statement of assets and liabilities at the end of the period

Categories	Details	Unrestricted to nearest £	Restricted to nearest £	Endowment to nearest £
B1 Cash funds	Orchard	2,698	-	-
	Nature Reserve	5,287	-	-
			-	-
	Total cash funds	7,985	-	-
	(agree balances with receipts and payments account(s))	OK	OK	OK
		Unrestricted funds	Restricted funds	Endowment funds
	Details	to nearest £	to nearest £	to nearest £
B2 Other monetary assets		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
B3 Investment assets	Details	Fund to which asset belongs	Cost (optional)	Current value (optional)
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
B4 Assets retained for the charity's own use	Details	Fund to which asset belongs	Cost (optional)	Current value (optional)
			-	-

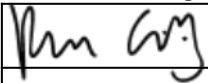
Charity's own use

		-	-
		-	-
		-	-
		-	-
		-	-
		-	-
		-	-
		-	-

B5 Liabilities

Details	Fund to which	Amount due	When due
		-	
		-	
		-	
		-	
		-	

Signed by one or two trustees

Signature	Print Name	Date of approval
	Penny Gray	12 May 2025