



Community
Foundation

Northumberland's Vital Issues 2017

Environment

1 Environment

1.1 Overview

Without doubt Northumberland is one of the best places in England for the quality of its environment. Its landscape is varied, ranging from the natural beauty of its coast and natural park to distinctive urban areas shaped by industrial development in the South East such as Blyth and Ashington.

In rural Northumberland there are the market towns of Morpeth, Hexham, Prudhoe, Berwick-upon-Tweed and Alnwick, each with their distinctive character whilst in the open space between small settlements and individual farmhouses predominate. Agriculture and forestry still shapes the landscape, but now tourism is also a major factor. However, rural Northumberland remains relatively underdeveloped, which has contributed both to the preservation of its distinctive appearance and also the diversity of its wildlife.

1.2 Comparing the Northumberland environment to other areas

Various composite scores are available which assess the quality and make-up of the environment and associated issues, each of which is discussed below.

The IMD Living Environment Deprivation Indexⁱ gives a very general indication of the state of the environment. Care needs to be taken in using it within Northumberland since it combines two measures into a single score:

- an indoor measure based on how much housing lacks central heating/fails to meet the Decent Homes standard and
- an outdoor measure based on air quality and road traffic accidents resulting in injury to pedestrians or cyclists.

The overall measure tends to mask the extent of the area's problems. The indoor score is higher in the rural parts of the county and the outdoor score affects mostly the urban areas. The end result is a cancelling out that fails to identify where the focus of effort should be. In addition, the comparatively good score for Northumberland as a whole can obscure the fact that there is significant deprivation at neighbourhood level.

In rural Northumberland there are areas where the Living Environment Deprivation Index, Indoor Measure suggests there is a significant problem with 6 wards in the 10% most deprived in England: Norham and Islandshires; Humshaugh; South Tynedale; Haydon and Hadrian; Bamburgh and Bellingham. A further 6 include smaller areas (LSOAs) in the worst 10% nationally. It is significant that this measure identifies rural areas rather than urban for the quality of housing. The rural areas are generally less deprived than the urban areas for most other deprivation domains. This, together with the proximity of services and amenities are the main issues for countryside dwellers in Northumberland.

The general picture for the outdoor measure is good, as you would expect given the low population and rurality of the county. Only central Ashington falls into the 20% most deprived for this measure: it is not clear whether this is due to air quality, traffic accidents or both.

A further measure is provided by the GTPA Natural Environment and Natural Beauty Scores. The environment score takes into account housing density; road density; air quality; tranquillity; natural beauty; green space; and water quality. The natural beauty score takes into account local assets such as National Parks; Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; Heritage Coasts; 'Blue Flag' beaches; Ancient Woodland; Nature Reserves and Environmentally-Sensitive Areas. On each of these measures Northumberland excels, locating the county within the top 10% nationallyⁱⁱ.

1.3 Biodiversity

One of the defining characteristics of Northumberland is its biodiversity. The County Council, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, DEFRA, Natural England, Environment Agency and Forestry Commission all have an interest in and responsibility for protecting vulnerable species and habitats in various ways. Many of these organisations provide opportunities for volunteering in some of this work. Northumberland has 6 main habitats as defined by the Northumberland Wildlife Trust: Coastal, Lowland, Rivers and Wetlands, Upland, Urban and Woodland

These are broken down into 24 areas like coastal heathland, reedbeds and sand dunes. There are also 22 species identified for special attention including bats, otters and water voles. Details can be found in the Northumberland Biodiversity Action Plan.ⁱⁱⁱ

A particular focus for action is the county's rivers. The Northumberland Rivers Trust, formed in 2011, has a catchment area approach that has the effect of covering most of the county in the context of environmental protection and development. This includes protecting endangered species, maintaining good fish stocks and habitats, all of which promotes biodiversity.

Philanthropy can continue to make a contribution to this effort by supporting civil society organisations that contribute to the above efforts or promote awareness of the issues and encourage local community involvement.

1.4 Vulnerability to climate change

Climate change is already having an effect. Two examples are the increased incidence of flash flooding and coastal erosion in Druridge Bay. The Northumberland Wildlife Trust is one example of an organisation that includes the effects of global warming in their approach to environmental issues. The trust has 60 nature reserves. Factors that increase vulnerability include:

- More extreme weather
- Flash flooding
- Moorland fires
- Sea level rise and coastal erosion
- Changes in the growing season and its impact on food production
- Changes in breeding and migration seasons
- Possible loss of farmland and unique habitats

The local economy can also be part of the global approach to climate change, for example by focusing on renewable energy production or purchasing sustainable produce that promotes sustainable farming practices. Civil society organisations have a role to play, particularly in education and working with local communities. Promoting sustainability can be part of the pursuit of wider issues such as tackling disadvantage. The county council has a climate change strategy and action plan.

This issue is particularly important to Northumberland with its long coastline, agricultural land, conservation locations and areas of natural beauty.

1.5 Transport

This is very much a live issue in the county's rural areas, and environmental concern focuses on alternatives to car use given the lack of public transport. Community transport is part of the solution and some civil society groups provide this service, often to address the problem of access to services. Walking and cycling is also an option, although there is perhaps a need to challenge the assumption that access to the countryside is easy for those that live there. Northumberland has many paths and cycleways, including the Pennine's Cycleway and the Hadrian's Cycleway. There are also coast and castle routes. Haltwhistle and Wooler are designated as cycle hubs which have cycle friendly accommodation and places to buy or hire bikes. From these two hubs there are 14 routes of varying difficulty. Kielder Water also has a 26 mile trail that encircles the reservoir.

1.6 Waste disposal

Official data from the county^{iv} suggests that the level of recycling in Northumberland is around the national average, with a bias toward incineration rather than landfill for unrecycled waste. Comparison of the relative environmental benefits of landfill and incineration is far from simple. For example, incineration has the biggest global warming potential and landfill is the biggest water polluter. On a positive note fly tipping is much lower in Northumberland than elsewhere. However it is perhaps to be expected, if not welcomed, that there is a greater incidence of highway fly-tipping than elsewhere in the North East.

Potential roles for philanthropy

- Maintaining and enhancing the quality of the county's outstanding natural assets (including its biodiversity) emerges as a key priority for local philanthropy. This could include work to promote environmental understanding and assist community organisations in enabling the county to meet the challenge of climate change.
- Addressing the problem of poor transport links in rural areas in a sustainable way is an area where charitable funding could make a significant difference: supporting community transport and cycling are possible areas of activity.

- Issues relating to the quality of the indoor environment emerge as a priority in rural areas, and this may well link with work to address problems of fuel poverty.

ⁱ **Dept of Communities and Local Government (2015)** *English Indices of multiple deprivation*, downloaded from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>

ⁱⁱ **Grant Thornton Place Analytics (subscription service)** <http://gt-placeanalytics.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.nwt.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Nland_Biodiversity_Action_Plan.pdf

^{iv} **WasteDataFlow**, <http://www.wastedataflow.org>, 2016