

URBAN GREEN NEWCASTLE EVALUATION

July 2025

research, evaluation, service design

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Executive summary

Urban Green Newcastle (UGN) was established in 2019 as an independent charity and Parks Trust model to manage and improve Newcastle's parks, allotments, and green spaces. The initiative was built on a strong foundation of collaboration, a shared vision, and political support. It was established to protect and enhance the City's green estate amid financial pressures on the local authority.

Key successes

UGN successfully managed a portfolio that included 33 parks, 61 allotment sites, and 57 buildings. Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that UGN made visible improvements across the City's green spaces, and that the estate was enhanced, supported by the introduction of a digital asset management system. Capital works included refurbished tennis courts, upgraded playgrounds and football pitches, and improved accessibility along footpaths and key cycle routes. Environmental sustainability was embedded into operations through habitat restoration, the planting of over 12,000 trees, and delivery of biodiversity projects such as Beelines North East, which created pollinator friendly habitats across 45 sites and involved young people through education and training.

Community engagement was a central pillar for UGN, with over 6,900 volunteer hours logged in the final year. Friends Groups and community partnerships contributed to events, clean-up days, and park improvements, and volunteering and community involvement were supported by the introduction of resources like the Volunteer Handbook and Urban Green Connect. UGN's cultural and wellbeing programming included seasonal events such as the Northern Lights Trail, outdoor cinemas, and wellbeing walks. Springbank Pavilion was transformed into a creative hub benefiting NHS staff, patients, and local residents.

UGN were successful in securing £3.67 million of additional funding, which supported infrastructure, biodiversity, accessibility, and community programmes. Stakeholders felt that UGN encouraged a holistic view of parks provision, building new partnerships and addressing some previously under-represented areas of activity. Participation in the Future Parks Accelerator programme further supported the development of sustainable urban green space management. Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that UGN developed pioneering plans for income generation through Biodiversity Net Gain opportunities.

Key challenges

UGN's operating environment became increasingly challenging over time. Several external shocks, including the Covid-19 pandemic, Storm Arwen, the cost of living crisis, and changes in event licensing, negatively impacted income generation opportunities and increased the operating costs. This was particularly difficult for a new organisation, still establishing systems and processes and dealing with a vast estate that had experienced a significant decline in funding and upkeep over recent years. These events exposed the fragility of the financial model which was heavily reliant on earned income.

Despite strong support from senior council officers and some elected members, between 2021 and 2024, there was significant turnover within the leadership in Newcastle City Council. These staff changes coincided with political leadership changes, and stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that this had a negative impact on partnership working. The loss of political champions together with the withdrawal of Councillor Trustees weakened UGN's influence and visibility, contributing to a perception that it was operating in isolation. This erosion of political capital was felt to be a key factor in the 2024 Council decision to bring parks and allotments management back in-house.

The early termination of UGN means that its potential impact is difficult to assess in full. The time frame limited opportunities for UGN to demonstrate long-term social, environmental, and economic benefits.

What could have been done differently?

Several lessons emerged from the evaluation relating to the pre-transfer feasibility and development phase, and the operational phase of UGN, including:

- **Comprehensive due diligence:** A full and consistent assessment of the condition of all transferred assets, including buildings, trees, and infrastructure, was needed to better understand the maintenance and security requirements and the associated financial risks. This should have been fully incorporated into the financial modelling.
- **Flexible financial planning:** A more cautious financial model with built-in contingencies for unexpected costs (vandalism, storm damage, policy changes) and more flexibility on commercial income assumptions could have mitigated risks. Recognition in the model of the higher legal, insurance, HR, and IT costs for a smaller charity was also required. Formal mechanisms for contingency planning and financial support from the local authority during emergencies or exceptional risks could also have been established.

- **Shadow organisation:** A shadow organisation with senior operational expertise, working alongside the council before transfer could have provided strategic challenge and risk management advice, improving the readiness and resilience of UGN.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** A clearer and resourced stakeholder engagement strategy would have built a stronger understanding of UGN, and improved advocacy and ownership among councillors, senior officers, community groups, and residents. Dedicated communications capacity was needed to support this.
- **KPI's and impact measurement:** Establishing a suite of performance indicators reflecting social, environmental, and operational outcomes from the outset would have helped demonstrate UGN's value to stakeholders.

Could this Parks Trust Model work in Newcastle?

Determining the viability of the Parks Trust model in Newcastle is complex. While Parks Trust models have succeeded elsewhere, success depends on the local context, including:

- The ability to commercialise assets effectively,
- The condition of the estate at transfer,
- Unforeseen external events (pandemic, economic crises, extreme weather events),
- Political and organisational will to devolve control alongside a supportive working relationship, and
- Adequate funding and income generation potential.

While income generation from fundraising was relatively strong compared to the original forecasts, commercial income generation was more difficult, and expenditure consistently exceeded budget projections (averaging 125% and ranging from 102% to 150% of budget annually). This expenditure, primarily on maintenance and repair, was unavoidable due to the condition of the estate and the unexpected events. This revealed a structural imbalance in the financial model. An assessment of the financial model shows that longer term financial sustainability might have been possible under more favourable conditions, but these scenarios were not possible, due to external factors.

The cumulative effect of external shocks, operational challenges, lack of financial reserves, and the absence of contingency arrangements left UGN financially vulnerable. A 2022 review commissioned by UGN and completed by The Cranfield Trust, highlighted this fragility, suggesting that the projected incomes were unlikely to be achieved. A longer period of operating would have allowed more

thorough testing of the financial and operational assumptions and better reflection of the model's complexity.

Key lessons for future Parks Trust models

The Urban Green Newcastle experience offers valuable insights for future Parks Trust initiatives in other areas:

- **Comprehensive due diligence:** Full asset condition surveys and independent expert review before transfer are essential to ensure clear understanding of the scale of responsibilities and risks.
- **Formalised partnerships:** Legal agreements should clarify shared values, roles, expectations, and dispute resolution processes, protecting all parties. Cross-party political support, clear governance, and long-term agreements will help to maintain continuity in the event of political changes.
- **Robust, flexible financial models:** Financial assumptions should be stress tested across scenarios including downturns and inflation, and conservative commercial income projections in the early years and ring-fenced contingency funds would reduce risks. Considering endowments or commercial income (e.g., building rentals) can improve long-term sustainability. Budgets should factor in the higher overhead costs in legal, HR, and IT services as well as insurance premiums, in a smaller independent organisation. Councils, or other partners, could provide transitional back-office services for finance, payroll, and HR support to reduce the 'start-up burden'.
- **Phased transfers:** Piloting the model with a proportion of the estate, before a full transfer, would allow the new organisation to build capacity and test systems.
- **Maximise funding opportunities:** Parks Trusts can access grants that are unavailable to councils, but this requires skilled staff with capacity to do this and time to build relationships with funders to secure these grants. Grants are often only for new projects, but often funders will contribute to a proportion of core costs.
- **Strong communications and partnerships:** Dedicated resources for external communications and partnership working are crucial to build trust and alignment with the values of a new organisation.
- **KPI's and impact measurement:** Establishing social, environmental, and economic performance indicators are essential to capture the true value of green spaces beyond just the financial metrics. Again, this requires skilled staff with the capacity to do this.

Sufficient time is essential to allow a new model to be established and resources are needed to support a new organisation through start-up, transition, and delivery phases. This includes sufficient core funding for leadership and infrastructure, investment in systems and processes, and the capacity to manage risk, monitor impact, and build relationships with stakeholders.

In summary, the evaluation has shown that while Urban Green Newcastle achieved a number of successes, the scale and complexity of the estate, combined with external events, financial fragility, and political changes, meant that this model ultimately did not succeed in Newcastle. Nonetheless, Newcastle City Council should be recognised for its vision and willingness to test an alternative approach, and UGN's Trustees and staff for the significant progress and improvements achieved. Although the model was not given sufficient time to prove its sustainability, it generated valuable learning.



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1.Introduction

Urban Green Newcastle (UGN) was established as a charity, initially named the Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust, in 2019, to find creative ways to secure the future of public green space in Newcastle. It was established by Newcastle City Council (NCC), working with the National Trust (NT) and National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), in response to the significant challenges that Newcastle City Council had faced in maintaining green public open spaces, a non-statutory service, in the face of austerity.

Following three years of consultation and research to explore the most appropriate model for the City, the charity was launched in April 2019. Its remit was to look after 33 of the City's parks ranging from traditional Victorian city-centre parks, through to neighbourhood parks, country parks, wooded denes and nature reserves, 61 allotment sites containing over 3,000 individual plots and covering approximately 51 hectares, and 57 buildings, plus bandstands and other similar structures. The estate covered 520 hectares in total.

The charity was provided with a business plan and financial package from NCC which assumed financial self-sufficiency within 10 years of operation. Following a range of challenges and external factors, UGN had to seek additional financial support from NCC in 2023/24, to cover the 2024/25 financial year. An interim grant was provided, on the condition that NCC would commission a review of UGN in 2024, pending a decision on its long-term future. Following the review, the NCC Cabinet made a decision to take back control of the parks and allotments, and the final transfer was made in March 2025.

Fuel Research were commissioned by Urban Green Newcastle and the National Trust to evaluate the successes, challenges and the closure of the charity, and to provide learning for other areas that may be considering a Parks Trust model. The evaluation covered the period from the charity's inception (pre-2019), its creation and operation, and the factors which led to the Council taking back control in 2025.

The remainder of this evaluation report is laid out as followed:

- **Chapter 2** describes the evaluation questions, methodology and limitations.
- **Chapter 3** gives an overview of Urban Green Newcastle, including the scale and scope of operations.
- **Chapter 4** documents the key successes and achievements of UGN in the six years of operation.
- **Chapter 5** describes some of the key barriers and challenges that UGN faced, including the pandemic.
- **Chapter 6** discusses the financial model that was given to UGN.
- **Chapter 7** highlights the key learning points from the UGN model that may offer valuable insights for other areas exploring a Parks Trust approach.
- **Chapter 8** includes the conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation of UGN.
- **Appendix 1** includes detail on some of the other Parks Trust models in the UK.

2. Evaluation methodology

In May 2025, Fuel Research were appointed by UGN and the National Trust to conduct an independent evaluation of the UGN model, to identify successes and challenges and to identify lessons that may be beneficial to other areas that are considering a Parks Trust model.

2.1 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation of the Urban Green Newcastle Parks Trust model is to:

- Assess UGN's performance against its strategic aims and objectives, highlighting key successes and achievements.
- Evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the target operating model (TOM) and financial model.
- Identify internal and external factors that influenced success, including barriers, enablers, and challenges.
- Explore areas for improvement by considering what could have been done differently.
- Document key learning points and insights, of the Parks Trust approach in Newcastle that may support other areas exploring a Parks Trust model.

2.2 Methodology

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach, combining analysis of monitoring data and reports with the insights from staff, trustees and stakeholders, gathered through 23 in-depth qualitative interviews. The methodology included:

- **Analysis of background documents and data** – We reviewed key organisational documents, strategic plans, annual accounts, and relevant data to understand UGN’s development, operations, and impact over time.
- **Assessment of the financial model** – We examined UGN’s financial model, including the original assumptions made prior to 2019, relating to income generation and commercialisation, to evaluate the sustainability and robustness of the Parks Trust model.
- **Interviews with staff and trustees** – We conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of internal stakeholders, including operational staff, both past and present, and board members, to gather insights into the charity’s governance and delivery. We conducted 10 interviews with staff and trustees. One previous trustee was invited to contribute to the evaluation but was unavailable.
- **Interviews with Newcastle City Council staff and elected members** - We carried out one-to-one semi-structured interviews with Newcastle City Council staff, past and present, and elected members. We conducted four interviews and a further two NCC stakeholders were invited to participate in the evaluation and did not respond.
- **Interviews with external stakeholders** – We carried out one-to-one semi-structured interviews with wider partners and stakeholders, including National Trust, Friends Groups and Allotments to explore perceptions of UGN’s role, effectiveness, and external communications and engagement. We conducted nine interviews with stakeholders.

Care has been taken to ensure confidentiality was preserved during analysis and reporting.

2.3 Limitations to the methodology

There are limitations to all evaluations, and it is important that these are documented to ensure a balanced and transparent interpretation of the findings. This includes reflections on the scope of available data, the representativeness of stakeholder participation, and any constraints that may have influenced the evaluation process or outcomes.

Considerable effort was made to ensure a rigorous and balanced approach, but the following limitations should be acknowledged:

- **Limited sample size** – Due to resource constraints, the number of interviews conducted was limited to 23 staff and stakeholders. Therefore, findings should be interpreted with caution and not assumed to fully represent the views of all relevant stakeholders.
- **Sampling bias** – The selection of participants involved in interview may not fully reflect the diversity of views across all stakeholder groups. An additional three stakeholders were invited to participate in the evaluation but were either unable to participate or did not respond.
- **Data availability** – Some gaps in data may have limited our ability to assess the successes and achievements in depth, particularly regarding long-term impact and comparative benchmarking.
- **External influences** – The operating environment for UGN has been shaped by broader contextual factors, which may have affected outcomes independently of the model's design or implementation.
- **Scope of the evaluation** – This evaluation did not include a formal cost–benefit analysis, which may be relevant for future decision-making in other areas. **Consideration of the non-financial benefits of the UGN model were out of the scope of the evaluation.**

3. About Urban Green Newcastle

3.1 Background and rationale for UGN

Over a period of several years Newcastle City Council's parks **budget was reduced by 92%**, meaning that finding new ways of financing and running Newcastle's parks and allotments was essential. A July 2017 Newcastle City Council Cabinet Report¹ references that the Parks and Countryside Service budget was reduced from £2.589m in 2010/11 to £0.087m in 2017/18, as a result of austerity. In 2017, the Council felt that if a new delivery model was not established, further budget reductions would *"result in repairs and maintenance levels reducing, and severely compromising the quality, safety and future of the estate."*²

¹

<https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Libraries%20%26%20Hubs/Parks%20%26%20Open%20Spaces/6.Cabinet%20Report%20-%2020%20November%202017%20and%20Background%20Paper.pdf>

² Ibid

Parks are not a statutory service but were felt to be critical to the City's infrastructure and wellbeing, and finding a solution to the financial pressures, to protect the parks estate, was a priority for the Council. Newcastle City Council, working in partnership with the National Trust, sought to find a positive way forward. The National Trust recognised that austerity and shrinking budgets for parks and green spaces were putting access to nature at risk for millions of people in urban areas. Aligned with its strategic aim to tackle unequal access to nature, particularly through urban partnerships, the National Trust supported Newcastle City Council in developing a new model to safeguard the City's green spaces. The project, and the creation of Urban Green Newcastle, reflected the National Trust's aim of increasing access to nature in priority cities, like Newcastle, by protecting and enhancing green and heritage spaces.

During 2017 a robust consultation exercise was conducted with elected members, the public, Council staff and stakeholders. The Urban Green Newcastle (UGN) model emerged in response to the research and consultation, representing a proposal for a significant shift from local authority oversight to an independent Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) model. This plan for an innovative transition aimed to secure long-term sustainability in the management of parks, allotments and open spaces and, importantly, sought to diversify funding sources, through grants, fundraising, and commercial activity, to reinvest directly back into park maintenance and improvement.

The consultation results were included in the impact assessment (October 2017), and it was deemed that, although there were some concerns about commercialisation, only positive impacts would be achieved.

A financial model was developed by NCC, Social Finance and the National Trust, and on 20 November 2017, the NCC Cabinet agreed to create a new Charitable Trust, called the Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust (NPAT), and to transfer parks and allotments to the new organisation to develop and care for, for future generations.

In November 2017, the **Newcastle City Council Cabinet agreed** to:

- create a Newcastle Parks Charitable Trust.
- the assets in scope for transfer to the Trust and approved their long lease transfer (125 years) at a peppercorn rent, together with the associated transfer of staff and business operations to the Trust.

- guarantee the new Trust's admission to the Local Government Pension Scheme.
- a revenue contribution to the Trust of £9.5m³ over its first 10 years of operation to financial independence.
- work with the National Trust and the Parks' Trust to support an endowment⁴.
- authorise the Director of Resources, the Assistant Director (Transformation) and the Assistant Director (Legal Services) in consultation with relevant cabinet members to negotiate and finalise the terms of the transactions, and authorise the Assistant Director (Legal Services) to enter into the documents to transfer the relevant assets to the Trust; and
- agree that the Council should try to mitigate irrecoverable VAT liability for the Trust by undertaking capital works for the Trust.

The **core principles**, or requirements, of the Trust that were established by the Council in 2017 were:

- all parks should remain in Council ownership and there should be an equality of resources and enjoyment across all of the City's parks.
- parks should be clean, and visitors should feel and be safe.
- parks should be free to access and use, but charging for some facilities and activities should continue and be increased.
- access to open space for play and sport, and to allotments was essential for health and wellbeing.
- existing groups were integral to any new solutions.

The **Council expected that the transfer would:**

- protect and develop the City's parks and allotments,
- safeguard jobs and create additional employment and training opportunities.
- alleviate capacity pressures in Local Services, and
- over a 125-year lease arrangement, deliver an estimated long-term saving of over £110m, after the initial 10-year period.

³ This was reduced to £7.7m due to VAT requirements

⁴ An endowment was not provided

3.2 Parks Trust models

A Parks Trust model is one of the alternative models for the management and funding of public parks in the UK, often with a focus on charitable trust models. Parks Trusts vary from full park management to fundraising and enhancement roles. They are typically independent charities and have a mix of endowments, investments, commercial income, grants, and donations. Further detail on some other Parks Trust models is included in [appendix one](#).

The Parks Trust model has developed over the past ten years, but at the time of the feasibility and consultation work in Newcastle, there was little evidence and learning about the model, and the model in Newcastle was pioneering and innovative.

3.3 The creation of Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust

A mobilisation plan was put in place, running from November 2017 with agreement by Cabinet, through to December 2018 / April 2019 with the transfer of all staff, parks, buildings and allotments to Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust. The Trust was later changed to Urban Green Newcastle (UGN), with the name change reflecting the vision to not only manage parks and allotments but also to promote environmental sustainability and community engagement across the City.

Objects and aims of Urban Green Newcastle

UGN was established for public benefit, especially for the residents of, and visitors to, Newcastle upon Tyne and the surrounding areas to:

- maintain, protect and improve parks, allotments, open spaces, woodlands and recreational spaces.
- advance health by promoting participation in sport and other outdoor recreation.
- provide recreation and leisure facilities, including allotments; and
- advance education in the conservation, protection and improvement of the natural environment; the history, culture, heritage and traditions of the North East; and the arts, especially in parks.

The scope of UGN

Newcastle Parks and Allotments Trust officially started operating on 1st April 2019, and was responsible for the management, maintenance, restoration, development, and protection of Newcastle's 33 parks, 61 allotment sites and 57 buildings including former park lodges, bowling

pavilions, a variety of huts and depots, listed buildings and sports facilities. Bandstands are not included with in the 57 buildings. The areas in scope for the transfer to UGN included ⁵:

- Principal Parks, Countryside Parks, and Neighbourhood Parks,
- Playgrounds in parks,
- Buildings in parks, and
- Allotments.

There were no targets or key performance indicators set for UGN, by NCC, other than financial targets and the charitable objects. This was to enable UGN to establish its own performance measures.

During the first months of operation, 19 members of staff TUPE transferred to UGN from Newcastle City Council, one member of staff was seconded, and six new employees were recruited. By the end of year one UGN had 23 members of staff and were recruiting to fill a further 12 vacancies.

During year one (2019/20) UGN held several public consultation events that led to the creation of a vision, mission and identity for the charity, which was launched in October 2019 at a public event.

4. Key successes and achievements

This chapter provides an overview of some of the key successes, impacts, and achievements, drawing on available documents, online resources and in-depth interviews with staff, trustees and stakeholders.

4.1 Management, maintenance and improvement of parks and green spaces

Urban Green Newcastle successfully managed and maintained 33 parks, 61 allotment sites, and 57 buildings across the City. Some of the improvements that have been reported include:

- Continued delivery and improvement of routine grounds maintenance, including grass cutting, litter collection, and tree care, ensuring high standards across the estate. Grass cutting and waste

⁵ The areas out of scope included: closed graveyards; playgrounds outside parks; recreation grounds; the Town Moor; Westerhope Golf Club and Newcastle United Golf Club; and other green spaces e.g. grass verges.

collection was conducted by NCC, with a series of service level agreements (SLAs) in place with UGN.

- Introduction of a **digital asset management system** to streamline maintenance and prioritise repairs.
- Refurbishment of **22 tennis courts** across seven parks, including at Exhibition Park and Paddy Freeman's Park in partnership with the Lawn Tennis Association.
- Upgrades to the **football pitches** at Walker Park and Paddy Freeman's, supported by the Football Foundation.
- Upgrades to sections of **Hadrian's Cycleway** in Tyne Riverside Country Park and Walker Riverside Park, including widening paths, installing a surface with better grip, a tree root protection system, rebuilding riverbank areas, improving drainage, and planting additional vegetation and wildflowers. This made the cycleways safer for cyclists, pedestrians, horse riders, and wheelchair users, while supporting biodiversity. The project was delivered in partnership with Sustrans.
- **Improvements to play areas** and exercise equipment including improved inspection and maintenance processes, and repair or replacement of equipment at key sites, including in response to vandalism and arson attacks.

The Natural Capital Account⁶ report, commissioned by UGN, quantifies the gross benefits generated by green space investment and 6 million recreational visits each year. The report estimates that these are £135m overall, including £128m per year in terms of health benefits, 62% of which relates to mental health improvements.

Staff and stakeholders involved in the evaluation agree that **the estate was returned to the council in better condition** than when it was received in 2019.

4.2 Environmental and conservation initiatives

Biodiversity and environmental conservation were a priority for Urban Green Newcastle and underpinned all projects. This contributed to the long-term ecological health of Newcastle's green spaces. UGN's contribution to sustainability and biodiversity included:

- Introduction of **sustainable land management practices**, including reduced pesticide use and habitat restoration.

⁶ Natural Capital Accounts (NCA) present the estimated visits and annual monetary value of a place's publicly accessible green spaces.

- Planting of over **12,000 trees** across the estate, contributing to Newcastle's climate resilience goals.
- Creation of **wildflower meadows** and pollinator-friendly planting schemes across a number of parks such as Heaton Park and Elswick Park.
- Support for citizen science projects, such as **wildlife surveys and biodiversity mapping**, in collaboration with local environmental groups.
- **Beelines North East**, a collaboration with Northumberland Wildlife Trust, which aimed to protect pollinators like bees and butterflies by creating a network of 45 nectar-rich public sites across Newcastle's parks and green spaces. The project planted 2,500 trees and 25,000 bulbs, including crocuses, snowdrops, and daffodils, and established 18 hectares of grassland. It also engaged young people through traineeships, volunteering, and educational programmes, including opportunities for young offenders. Beelines North East was funded by a £697,800 grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund.
- **Newcastle's Nature Networks and Nature Neighbourhoods** worked to expand and improve pollinator pathways across the City and support habitat creation and restoration projects. This project, in partnership with seven other partner organisations across the City, included creating and restoring 41 green spaces across public parks, nature reserves and previously developed land, to support the growth of pollinator species across the City. The project gave residents the opportunity to get involved by identifying and recording the wildlife they saw in parks and allotments. As part of this project, Northumbrian Water funded the installation of a new floating ecosystem in the lake in Exhibition Park to help improve water quality and local wildlife.

4.3 Engagement and collaboration with Friends Groups, allotments and volunteers

Stakeholders reported that direct volunteering across the parks was sporadic and inconsistent at the time of transfer to UGN and ranger-led volunteering only happened in a few parks. Friends Groups were very active in a few parks, and most Friends Groups are separate organisations, run independently, and in some cases, registered as charities. UGN was keen to continue to support Friends Groups, while expanding opportunities and ways of getting involved as a 'direct volunteer' with UGN.

Direct volunteering with UGN

UGN offered direct volunteering opportunities, in addition to the volunteering with Friends Groups, encouraging individuals to get involved in park maintenance and enhancement. For direct volunteering, key highlights include:

- An improved volunteering offer, by appointing a dedicated volunteer officer in 2020, and procuring specific volunteer equipment.
- Established systems and processes for volunteers, including an induction process, policies and a Volunteer Handbook and Corporate Volunteering Policy.
- Making volunteering more accessible, through the introduction of Better Impact volunteer management software, which allowed people to sign up for sessions online, and by expanding the number, location and type of volunteer sessions to include weekends and family volunteering, roving rangers, café volunteers etc. To support this, role profiles were developed and advertised on the UGN website and via social media.
- Training staff to understand better the importance of volunteers, improve communications, and ensure consistency in how volunteering sessions were run.
- Expanding the number of parks benefitting from volunteer sessions, to ensure that all areas were benefitting. Ranger-led sessions were offered in all parks on a regular basis and publicised through the UGN website and via social media.
- Expanding the number of groups volunteering, building relationships with organisations such as Good Gym and Walker Wasters who became regular volunteers.
- Introducing corporate volunteering and developing a partnership with The Conservation Volunteers.

Some examples of volunteering opportunities included:

- Regular volunteer sessions across parks, involving tasks such as clearing pathways, tending flowerbeds, repairing fences, and keeping parks litter free.
- Establishing Urban Green Clean, a dedicated team established during the Covid-19 pandemic in response to increased park usage, focused on keeping the parks clean.
- Seasonal volunteer drives, such as autumn leaf clearance and spring bulb planting blitzes, often promoted through local schools and community centres.
- Involvement in capital improvement projects, like footpath upgrades in North Kenton Park and stonework repairs in Jesmond Dene.
- Joint delivery of community clean-up days, seasonal planting events, and park improvement projects with partners.

Thousands of volunteer hours were contributed annually, including **over 6,900 direct volunteer hours** in 2024/5, which is an increase of 500 hours compared to 2023/4. This number doesn't include volunteering hours by Friends Groups.

It should also be noted that volunteering was significantly impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic and not all volunteers returned.

Friends Groups and community groups

UGN worked closely with more than 30 active community groups, including Friends Groups, and provided training, resources, and coordination support. Examples include:

- Collaboration with groups to deliver joint events like wildlife walks, wreath-making workshops, and family fun runs.
- Support for new groups forming in under-represented areas, including the creation of community representation groups to advise on park priorities.

Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that the transition to UGN extended the scale and scope of volunteering in parks and green spaces across the City. Despite the impact of Covid-19 which reduced volunteering across the country, UGN extended volunteering, based on effective partnership working with new and existing organisations ranging from the corporate volunteering to links with the National Citizen Service, Newcastle United Foundation and the Probation Service.

Allotments

The transition to Urban Green Newcastle was challenging for some Allotment committees, particularly those with longstanding committee members who often opposed the change. The appointment of a new allotment officer was welcomed, and strong relationships were built. Allotment committees reported that governance improved under UGN, with measures such as consistency in constitutions, signed codes of conduct, and accurate plot holder records being implemented by the new allotment officer. While some committee members, often those who were less confident with technology, felt burdened by the increased administration, UGN felt these steps were essential for accountability and compliance with data protection.

Stakeholders reported that the introduction of a more consistent use of waiting lists brought in a more diverse mix of plot holders, including more women and children. The 2024 allotment show was

well attended and reported by many as a highlight, however allotment stakeholders felt the communication around the transition back in to the Council could have been clearer.

4.4 Community events and activities

UGN delivered, either directly or in partnership with others, a diverse and inclusive programme of events including arts, cultural, educational, and recreational activities, including:

- The **Northern Lights Trail** in Leazes Park became a seasonal attraction starting in 2023, transforming the space through immersive light installations, attracting around 100,000 visitors. This elevated the park's profile as a cultural venue, while generating footfall that benefited local businesses and created temporary employment opportunities.
- A regular schedule of **outdoor cinema screenings**, **local food markets** and **seasonal fairs** (e.g. spring festivals, Halloween trails, and winter craft fairs), and pop-up events, like mobile libraries or bike repair cafés.
- Structured programmes like **wellbeing walks** for older adults in partnership with Newcastle Council, **mindfulness sessions** in green spaces, and **yoga classes** tailored to different ability levels, to support physical and mental health.
- Increase in **sporting activities**, with partnerships with Newcastle City Council, the Lawn Tennis Association, We Do Tennis, Newcastle United Foundation, Football Foundation, Northumberland Cricket board, Northumberland Football Association, England Basketball, Eagles Basketball, Falcons Rugby, Try Tag Rugby, Dallaglio Rugby Works, England Netball, England Golf, RISE, NE Youth, Bike 4 Health, Cycling UK, Sustrans, Street Games, Power Through Sport and many local community based organisations to deliver more sporting activities.
- Delivery of **nature based play** sessions for children, and **gardening and community growing** clubs to support physical and mental health.
- Provision of **warm spaces** and community hubs during winter months, offering free activities and social connection. Cafés and sheltered park facilities doubled as community hubs, providing warm, welcoming environments for those experiencing isolation or fuel poverty. Activities ranged from **craft workshops** and board games to **'tea and chat'** sessions and community cooking. These were all free of charge, with hot drinks available and volunteers on hand for support. These efforts aligned with citywide strategies to tackle winter hardship and loneliness.

- **Springbank Pavilion**, in Leazes Park, was transformed into a **creative arts hub** through a partnership with Newcastle Hospitals Charity. The project offered free, accessible workshops led by local arts organisations Chilli Studios, Curious Arts, and Gem Arts, focusing on crafts, printmaking, and pottery inspired by nature. Self-led activities were available online and in printed booklets, allowing participation from hospital wards, waiting rooms, or home. The pavilion's refurbishment made it a welcoming space for NHS staff, patients, and the community.

To enhance collaboration, UGN established **Urban Green Connect**, to communicate and consult with park users, stakeholders, and Friends Groups. Findings and recommendations were reported directly to the Board of Trustees, reflecting a commitment to work collaboratively, ensuring everyone with an interest in Newcastle's parks and allotments could contribute to their future. Urban Green Connect enabled interested stakeholders to share views on park management and identify challenges and opportunities and contribute to developing individual action plans for each of the 33 parks in consultation with local communities.

4.5 Fundraising and partnership projects

UGN was successful at fundraising, including securing 49 grants and donations totalling over **£3.67m**, to support a wide range of initiatives, including:

- Capital repairs and infrastructure improvements across multiple parks and play areas.
- Community events and cultural programming.
- Tree planting and biodiversity projects.
- Accessibility upgrades, including improved pathways.
- Volunteer development and training, and purchase of essential equipment, including vehicles and tools, enabling greater community participation in park stewardship.

UGN successfully secured funding and partnership projects with a range of local and national organisations, such as:

- Lawn Tennis Association, Sustrans and Football Foundation for capital investment in sports facilities.
- National Trust, NLHF and Natural England for conservation and heritage projects.

- Collaborations with schools and youth organisations to deliver environmental education and outdoor learning.
- Engagement with health and wellbeing partners to embed green prescribing and social prescribing initiatives.
- A range of partnerships with local organisations such as The Skill Mill, Probation Service, and NHS, to increase public involvement in parks.
- Northumbria University on a range of research and student involvement projects.
- Working with the Elders Council to install appropriate exercise equipment for the older generation.
- Partnering with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) on a programme of 'Safer Parks for Women and Girls' events and improvements in Leazes Park.
- Developing an annual Blossom Festival with the National Trust to encourage people to unwind with nature.

This reflected UGN's ability to build strong partnerships with funders and partners and align projects with local priorities.

Biodiversity Net Gain

The concept of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was embedded within NCC's planning framework and became a statutory requirement through the Environment Act in 2021. UGN recognised the opportunities to manage the parks better for biodiversity and unlock new sources of income that had not been included as a funding stream in the financial model.

UGN, with grant funding from government, and support from the National Trust, worked with a specialist consultancy to develop a model which would enable the charity to provide a 'third party' service to developers, including NCC, to deliver off-site BNG. This would have created and improved natural habitats and ensured no net loss of biodiversity with the city boundary as a result of development and house building, and also provided funding for ongoing maintenance of these new and improved habitats.

UGN were close to signing agreements with developers, amounting to over £1m, but work ceased in 2024 due to the transfer back to NCC. UGN forecast that BNG could have generated £5m from two parks, over a 30 year period, with the potential for more from other parks. If this had gone ahead, Newcastle would have been one of the first local authorities to unlock BNG funding for its own land.

4.6 Governance and organisational practice

UGN established a strong governance framework as an independent new charity, including:

- A skilled Board of Trustees providing strategic oversight and expertise, with regular Board and sub-committee meetings, with agendas and minutes, to promote openness and build stakeholder confidence,
- Implementation of a risk management framework and internal audit processes to ensure compliance and continuous improvement.
- Publication of annual reports, demonstrating transparency and accountability alongside audited financial statements.
- Establishment of core organisational systems including finance, HR, IT, and volunteer management, to support operations outside of the Local Authority structure, and the development of robust policies and procedures covering safeguarding, equality, health and safety, environmental sustainability, and volunteer management.
- Investment in staff training and development, including arboriculture, health and safety, and community engagement, as well as investment in volunteer training and development.
- Adoption of a Customer Charter outlining service standards and expectations for staff, volunteers, and park users.
- Creation of Urban Green Connect, a community panel designed to bring diverse voices into decision-making. The panel met quarterly to advise on community engagement, inclusion, and how to ensure parks and allotments were welcoming and relevant to all residents.
- Participation in the National Trust's Future Parks Accelerator programme, and its successor, Nature Towns and Cities, which provided strategic support, peer learning, and access to national expertise.

5. Barriers and challenges faced by UGN

This chapter draws on available documents, online resources and in-depth interviews with past and present staff, trustees and stakeholders to provide an overview of some of the key barriers and challenges that UGN and the Parks Trust model in Newcastle faced, once operational. This chapter is presented chronologically, where possible.

5.1 Feasibility and due diligence for the formation of a new organisation (2017 – 2019)

Newcastle City Council, working in partnership with the National Trust, agreed to establish a Parks and Allotments Trust in 2017 and both organisations worked together to plan the transition and complete due diligence. External advisors were involved for specialist areas, including legal advice and governance (Womble Bond Dickinson), tax advice (Ward Hadaway) and financial modelling (Social Finance). During this period the National Trust acted as a critical friend and provided pro-bono advice, as well as staff secondments, to plan for the transition. Some stakeholders involved in the evaluation were unsure of the role of the National Trust, but the vast majority felt this support was invaluable in the creation of UGN. A minority of stakeholders expressed that the National Trust operating model is significantly different and there was concern that some of these assumptions were used to inform the financial model that was later developed and approved by NCC.

The **feasibility and due diligence** work was undertaken with a strong commitment to finding a new way to support green spaces in Newcastle and a genuine commitment from partners to make things work. However, stakeholders reported that due diligence was conducted without full independent oversight or challenge from UGN, as it was not yet formed as an entity, meaning NCC assessed its own assumptions, governance approach, and delivery model. While this ‘self-led process’ was well intentioned and designed to give UGN the best chance of success, the absence of external scrutiny may have limited the objectivity and robustness of some of the assumptions in the financial model. Without external scrutiny, independent challenge or validation some stakeholders felt that there was limited objectivity, resulting in a **confirmation bias** in the feasibility work.

Some stakeholders felt that the assumptions in the financial model were based on the National Trust model, and this was significantly different to the UGN operating environment, in several ways including the demographics of parks users, the ‘opening hours’ and potential for damage or vandalism in some parks, and the ability to commercialise the UGN estate in the short term. Some stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that these factors may have resulted in different assumptions.

A key feature of founding UGN included that Trustees were recruited through an open and transparent process, selected by NCC for their alignment with the charity’s single, pre-agreed purpose, which was to manage and enhance Newcastle’s parks and allotments independently of the Council. The Trustee Board brought together individuals with expertise and demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to the vision. However, the strength of the founding partnership and the clarity of the original purpose may have constrained Trustees. The Trustees **inherited a financial**

model that had been largely predetermined, limiting their ability to influence or negotiate core funding assumptions or operational parameters. This reduced leverage meant that while Trustees were responsible for governance and oversight, they had limited scope to shape the underlying business model.

It is also important to acknowledge the **political context** during the charity's formation. Between 2015 and 2017, the proposal to transfer park management to an independent trust faced some significant political opposition. Participants in the evaluation told us that concerns were raised both within the Labour Group and by Liberal Democrat councillors, who questioned the long-term sustainability of the model and the potential loss of accountability. Opposition councillors, including both Labour and Liberal Democrats, continued to raise concerns about the trust's financial viability and the council's ability to fund parks if the model failed, despite the agreement that there were no other options available to NCC at the time, due to financial pressures.

A more rigorous, independently supported approach, with external validation and peer review, and with independent support for Trustees, could have ensured that the financial model and assumptions on income generation were robust, evidence-based, and aligned with relevant operational experience.

5.2 Establishing a new organisation (April 2019)

Newcastle City Council and the National Trust worked together to recruit trustees and a CEO through an open recruitment process in 2018. Trustees were on-board in late Summer 2018 and the chief executive started in December 2018. At this time UGN did not have systems, processes, IT equipment or 'phones, HR support, finance systems or support, and the charity was preparing for the large scale transfer of assets on 1 April 2019.

There were a number of challenges with establishing a new organisation. First of all, the chief executive was in post for just three months before the transfer. Effectively due diligence had been completed at this stage, and the role of the chief executive was to establish a new office, new systems and processes, and prepare for the TUPE of staff.

At the time of **TUPE transfer**, following year on year budget cuts and some significant redundancy rounds (e.g. all of the park keepers were made redundant), the existing team was described by stakeholders involved in the evaluation as having:

- Limited personal development and team development opportunities, resulting in low staff morale and a culture of negativity
- A lack of clarity over lines of responsibility and accountability, and no consequences for poor delivery
- A lack of co-ordinated planning across the estate resulting in some issues of non-compliance and breaches in health and safety.

In the first months there was much to do, including the recruitment of a senior management team, developing a more detailed operational plan and building the organisational culture. Some stakeholders criticised UGN for recruiting senior staff and investing in a new brand. However, the Trustees and CEO were committed to putting in place the infrastructure needed to run an organisation managing an estate of this scale. The recruitment of new senior roles, including commercial leads, was intended to strengthen UGN's capacity to diversify income and improve stakeholder engagement and fundraising. However, these appointments were perceived by many external stakeholders as 'top heavy'. Similarly, the investment in a refreshed brand and website, while aimed at improving public visibility and fundraising potential, drew criticism for appearing out of step with the financial position of the organisation.

During this time Trustees and the new CEO, as well as the NCC project team, were beginning to understand the scale and scope of the transfer. The **estate was vast and diverse**, encompassing a wide range of green spaces and community assets across the City, including:

- 33 parks, ranging from large, historic landscapes like Exhibition Park and Jesmond Dene to smaller neighbourhood parks and recreation grounds. Two of these were Green Flag Award winning parks in 2019, at the time of transfer to UGN.
- A mix of formal gardens, woodlands, wetlands, and open grasslands, and sites of historic and cultural significance, such as the Victorian features of Exhibition and Leazes Parks.
- Over 450,000 trees and a total area of over 520 hectares.
- 61 allotment sites.
- 64 children's play areas.
- 57 buildings, including cafés, community hubs, sports pavilions, and heritage structures, many of which required ongoing maintenance and investment.

Of the 57 buildings:

- 16 had a peppercorn rent (28%).
- 24 did not have a rental income due to the nature or use of the building (42%).
- 17 buildings (30%) were generating a rental income.

The usage of the 57 buildings is summarised below:

- 8 were for community use (14%).
- 13 were for commercial use (23%).
- 6 were residential (11%).
- 17 buildings were used by UGN (30%).
- 13 were void (23%), and 11 of these were considered to be derelict, or at risk, and required security.

The estate covered a significant proportion of Newcastle's public green space. Its diversity in scale, function, and community use made it a complex portfolio to manage. Stakeholders involved in the evaluation described **limited time to assess the conditions reports** for buildings, and these documents being partially completed. There were also issues with the transfer of **contaminated land**.

One external stakeholder felt that *"Newcastle Council seemed to use this as an opportunity to dispose of a lot of their liabilities. Many of these would have incurred costs to keep them safe."*

During this time, some stakeholders felt that both NCC and NT were being *"kept at a distance"* by UGN. Stakeholders have different perceptions of this, including feeling that UGN was trying to establish its position as an independent organisation and *"keeping the Council and National Trust at arm's length."*

At this time, stakeholders that participated in the evaluation reported that there was a recognition that while UGN was autonomous, both NCC and UGN needed to navigate new ways of working. During this time there was a need for regular liaison at appropriate levels, and clear senior contacts at NCC. There is an agreement that UGN could have worked harder at this, and with the loss of some key contacts within NCC, this led to a loss of the close partnership, and more of a transactional approach developed. While some stakeholders felt that both NCC and UGN were working hard at this

time to clarify roles and responsibilities at an operational level, and to build relationships, others felt that the relationship was damaged during this early phased of independent operation.

5.3 Historical under-investment

When Urban Green Newcastle assumed responsibility for the City's parks and allotments in 2019, it inherited an estate that had experienced over a decade of declining investment due to budget pressures. Between 2010 and 2019, Newcastle City Council's parks budget had been reduced from £2.58 million to under £1 million per year. This prolonged period of austerity was felt to have had a visible impact on the condition of green spaces, infrastructure, and associated assets. There had also been an investment of funding from the Public Health budget in parks, in 2017/18, of £1.030m, but this did not continue after the transfer to UGN.

At the point of transfer, it was acknowledged by both council officers and elected members that the parks estate was in a **state of disrepair** and required significant capital investment. Cabinet papers from the time described the challenges facing the parks and allotments, including deteriorating paths, outdated play equipment, and limited accessibility. However, these documents made little reference to the 57 buildings located within the parks, of which 11 were derelict or at risk. Many of these **buildings were in poor or unusable condition**, with issues such as structural damage, outdated utilities, and non-compliance with health and safety standards. Some, like the Fisherman's Lodge and Banqueting Hall in Jesmond Dene, were described by council officers in 2024 as being in "*significant disrepair*" and difficult to bring back into use without major investment.

The **lack of a comprehensive asset condition survey for all buildings** at the time of transfer meant that UGN had limited visibility of the full scale of the challenge and the likely costs associated. Of these 57 buildings, only 17 generated any income, and money was being spent to ensure the remaining buildings remained safe and secure. UGN discovered that many of the buildings had **issues with historical leases or covenants**, including both commercial and residential properties, which made it difficult to generate an income. UGN didn't have in-house legal expertise, which made it difficult to resolve these issues, without incurring significant legal fees.

There had been a historic reduction in the grounds maintenance of the parks which resulted in a reported decline in quality as a result of reduced grass cuts (both the areas and frequency), reduced litter collections, reduced annual bedding planting, down from 9 principal parks to two parks, reduced

shrub maintenance, and reduced tree works and inspections. One of the most significant impacts due to budget reductions had been the removal of all Park Keepers posts.

Stakeholders that participated in the evaluation also described a number of issues with trees, including:

- The tree condition reports received at transfer were carried out by different organisations using different methodologies, resulting in inconsistent data to base management decisions on. Given the potential risks, UGN focused a lot of time on this and spent over £250,000 in the first two years to tackle a backlog of tree maintenance.
- NCC had an SLA for tree inspections on UGN's behalf, but UGN was unable to receive condition reports electronically. With limited management information, in Winter 2021, UGN commissioned a full resurvey of all trees by an independent tree safety consultant. This enabled a prioritisation of risk, works required and timescales, and a further package of tree works, costing a further £250,000 was required.

In 2016, Councillor Kim McGuinness⁷, gave written evidence to the Public Parks Inquiry Select Committee, reporting that:

"In 2012 Newcastle was proud to have been awarded 11 Green Flags, which reflected the high quality of its parks. The parks were maintained by a team of 15 site based Park Keepers and a team of 8 full time rangers who worked with volunteers and the community and 1.5 pets Corner staff. The parks team also included a training section consisting of 2 members of staff. The parks team had 7 managers responsible for parks development and staff, 2 management support officers and a dedicated admin support officer. A total of 36.5 Full time staff.

By 2016 Newcastle has 2 Green Flag Parks, no Park Keepers, 4 core funded Rangers, 1.5 pets Corner staff, no training section, 3 managers and 1 management Support Officer. A total of 9.5 full time staff and a reduction in core funded full time staff of 74%.

⁷ Cllr. McGuinness was a UGN Trustee from 2018 until November 2019

Disregarding the positive impact of the £1m public health temporary funding, the parks budget has been reduced by 97% over a 5 year period from £2.589m to £0.253m.”⁸

Green Flag award status went from 11 parks in 2012, to just two parks in 2019, reflecting this under-investment. UGN worked to stabilise and improve the estate, introducing an asset management system and prioritising urgent repairs. However, the legacy of under investment continued to shape the operational priorities and financial planning.

UGN successfully increased Green Flag status to four parks (Jesmond Dene, Walker Park, Exhibition Park, and Leazes Park) during its tenure, however, at the point of transfer back to the Council only two parks (Exhibition Park and Jesmond Dene) had Green Flags. This later increased to four parks with Green Flag awards, in 2025, shortly after the transfer back to the Council.

5.4 Financial model and sustainability (2019 onwards)

Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that Urban Green Newcastle operated under a challenging financial model that, in hindsight, demonstrated an **optimism bias**. Stakeholders felt that the original business case overestimated the potential for commercial income generation and underestimated the costs associated with managing a large estate. Some of the key issues that were identified included:

- There were a series of external events that increased costs and reduced opportunities for commercial income generation.
- By Year 5, the organisation had achieved 57% of its projected net income target, highlighting a shortfall in revenue generation. In 2022/3 this was 66% of the annual target and in 2023/4 was 61%, but this fell to 57% in 2024/5 as UGN was unable to fundraise or generate sponsorship due to the uncertainty around its future.
- UGN successfully secured grants and donations, and while these were restricted to specific projects, they did contribute towards core operational costs, however some stakeholders felt that *“fundraising became a distraction, and time would have been better spent on commercial opportunities”*. However, during this time, as a result of Covid-19, the opportunities to commercialise were limited. UGN were also conscious of getting a balance between

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<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/72467/html/#:~:text=2.7%20As%20a%20consequence%20of,to%20take%20part%20in%20volunteering.>

community engagement and commercial opportunities, and deliberately tried to get this balance right, by fundraising for community programming.

- At the beginning, there were many SLAs in place with NCC for administration, IT, HR, payroll, waste collection, grass cutting. Some of these were not considered to be cost effective by UGN, while others were felt to be both cost effective and extremely valuable. Stakeholders described that there were benefits with NCC going above and beyond in times of crisis (e.g. additional waste collections during Covid-19, and tree issues during Storm Arwen).
- Performance monitoring focused primarily on financial metrics, without indicators for social and environmental outcomes, making it difficult for UGN to demonstrate impact.
- The need to generate income through events was significantly constrained by licensing restrictions that were imposed by NCC.

Further information on the financial model is included in [chapter six](#).

5.5 Volunteers and Friends Groups (2019 onwards)

At the time of transfer, stakeholders, as well as the National Trust Transition Report, reported that due to a decline in resources and staffing levels in the Ranger and Community Gardener team, as a result of austerity, the overall volunteering approach lacked coherence and strategic direction. At the point of transfer, there was:

- No overarching volunteering strategy to coordinate recruitment, induction, training, or ongoing support and limited documentation of volunteer roles, expectations, or progression pathways, resulting in inconsistent experiences for volunteers.
- Under resourcing of volunteer coordination and fragmentation across parks, with some sites benefiting from active Friends Groups and others lacking any structured volunteering.
- No Volunteer Action Plans in place to guide local delivery or align volunteer activity with organisational goals.

UGN recognised the importance of volunteers and volunteer safety and took steps to improve practice, including:

- Health and safety procedures were reviewed and standardised, including the introduction of risk assessments for volunteer tasks.

- Volunteer sessions were increasingly supervised by trained staff, such as Park Rangers, to ensure safe working conditions.
- A Volunteer Coordinator role was established to improve consistency in communication, scheduling, and support and training and induction materials were developed.

The Friends Groups had had little oversight from NCC as a result of austerity and declining budgets, particularly in relation to some Health and Safety requirements. Some Friends Groups were set up specifically as a response to austerity, as they could see their park declining, so had been operating with little external input from NCC.

UGN tried to establish systems to ensure they were compliant with essential Health and Safety requirements. However, some groups had not been doing this in the past and when NCC carried out an audit of activities prior to the transfer in 2019, there were examples where some groups were asked by the Council to cease some activities immediately until they had the correct training, and insurances. While this was conducted by NCC, it had a significant effect on the relationship between UGN and some Friends Groups, as the introduction of UGN was seen by many as the reason they had been asked to stop some activities, causing tension and bad feeling with Friends Groups, who felt UGN was overly bureaucratic and restrictive.

However, the Trustees and Senior Management Team emphasised the importance of fulfilling their health and safety responsibilities. Trustees viewed consistent risk management as essential to ensuring the wellbeing of volunteers, staff, and park users across the estate, as well as meeting their legal requirements as Trustees.

UGN tried to overcome this by introducing Partnership Agreements, setting out what Groups were licensed to do on the sites, but these were very unpopular, and in retrospect UGN staff felt that this could have been handled better by UGN. The Ranger and Community Gardener team worked hard to build better relationships, and stakeholders involved in the evaluation reported that things did improve over time. Some Friends Groups expressed concerns about communication with UGN, noting that they did not require additional support or oversight and were uncomfortable with supervision by Rangers, which they felt was unnecessary.

5.6 Pandemic (March 2020 onwards)

Less than a year after the transfer, the Covid-19 pandemic led to a nationwide lockdown, significantly disrupting the use of public spaces. During the lockdown period, access to both indoor and outdoor facilities was limited or suspended entirely, affecting planned activities, events and the broader vision for park development. As lockdown restrictions gradually lifted, parks experienced an increase in visitor numbers. With indoor venues such as cafes still subject to tight controls or slow reopening, residents increasingly used parks as a safe and accessible space for exercise and social interaction.

This **increased demand** further affirmed the value of parks as essential community assets, particularly in urban environments. However, the commercial potential of the parks was constrained during this period. While footfall increased, and therefore **maintenance costs increased**, the restrictions on indoor gatherings and activities meant that opportunities for income generation through events, café operations, room hire, and other indoor based services remained suspended or limited.

This created an imbalance, with outdoor space under more pressure, while indoor facilities and events, which were central to long-term financial sustainability of UGN, were under used due to the ongoing restrictions. By March 2022, restrictions had been lifted and while indoor services such as cafés, community rooms, and event hire faced social distancing requirements and phased reopening, outdoor space usage increased. This meant that there was a **slower recovery of indoor, revenue generating functions** and the recovery of associated commercial activities did not follow a simple linear trajectory.

5.7 Storm Arwen (November 2021)

In November 2021, Storm Arwen brought severe disruption to Newcastle's parks and green spaces, with the Met Office issuing a rare red weather warning as wind speeds reached up to 98 mph across the region. The storm was later described as one of the most damaging winter storms of the decade, with estimated damages across the UK reaching £300 million.

Newcastle's parks were hit particularly hard. The storm **uprooted or severely damaged around 400 trees** across the estate, and infrastructure such as fencing and pathways also sustained significant damage. The scale and suddenness of the destruction required an immediate, co-ordinated response.

Ranger teams, along with support from NCC colleagues, were deployed to assess damage, clear blocked paths, and ensure public safety. The recovery effort was extensive, with over 100 workdays

dedicated to clearing debris, removing hazardous trees, and stabilising affected areas. In many cases, large tree trunks were left in situ to serve as wildlife habitats, while others were earmarked for creative reuse within the parks.

During this time, UGN invested in upskilling its ranger team and trained staff in chainsaw use and other arboriculture skills, to manage the clean-up efficiently and build resilience for future extreme weather events.

The financial toll of Storm Arwen was significant, and the cost of the recovery exceeded £60,000, diverting resources from other planned improvements and routine maintenance⁹. This was closely followed by Storms Malik and Corrie, in January 2022, which led to the loss of a further 100 trees and more damage to fencing, buildings and infrastructure.

5.8 Licencing constraints

As part of the financial model, UGN planned to host a series of large scale events in the parks to generate income for reinvestment across the estate. However, the 2021 Great North Run (held on 12 September 2021) on the Town Moor, together with the *This is Tomorrow* music festival (held on 16-19 September 2021) held in Exhibition Park, resulted in over 90 complaints from nearby residents.

In response to this, **Newcastle City Council's licensing sub-committee imposed tighter conditions on future events**. Although UGN's licence was granted, it included stricter noise limits (capped at no more than 5 decibels above background levels, compared to the 10 dB UGN had requested), earlier closing times for live music and alcohol sales, and a cap on the number of major events allowed annually in the park.

Stakeholders who participated in the evaluation described an obvious tension between the need to diversify income streams while maintaining positive community relationships. While commercial events were intended to play an important role in funding park maintenance and enhancing wider community programming, this shows the complexities involved in activating park spaces for economic sustainability.

Following early consideration on the environmental impact on parks, as well as the impact on residents, followed by the licensing restrictions imposed, UGN adapted its approach to large-scale events. This included diversifying both the scale and location of events, with a greater emphasis on

⁹ <https://urbangreennewcastle.org/news/storm-arwen-one-year-on/>

programming a mix of smaller events, such as outdoor cinema nights, food markets, and festivals to align more closely with the scale and character of neighbourhood parks. This place sensitive approach to event planning did **not lead to the income generation** that was required by the financial model. The financial model shows income from events increasing from £17,000 in 2018 to over £500,000 by year five. In the stakeholder consultation interviews, there was a wide agreement that there were too many commercial events included in the financial model and the ambition was significantly overstated, however this was only realised in retrospect. One stakeholder commented *“the number and size of events planned was never a realistic option”*.

5.9 Cost of living crisis (late 2021 onwards)

The cost of living crisis began in late 2021 and worsened in 2022, with rising prices of goods and services particularly energy, with inflation peaking at 11% in 2022 and many households under pressure to cut back on spending. There were a number of impacts of the cost of living crisis on UGN, including:

- **Rising operational costs** - With increases in energy prices, insurance premiums, and materials, the cost of maintaining parks and delivering services increased. Heating and lighting community buildings and running equipment all became more expensive. The cost of materials and labour increased, and there was disruption to supply chains all putting additional pressure onto the UGN budget. Brexit also caused some significant cost increases and supply delays, for example with the repair and replacement of play equipment.
- **Reduced disposable income and donations** - With households facing higher food, fuel, and housing costs, charitable donations and discretionary spending dropped. This is likely to have affected income from café sales, room hire, and community fundraising.
- **Increased demand for free public space** - As people sought low cost ways to socialise and exercise, parks became even more vital. While this reinforced their social value, it also increased ‘wear and tear’ on the infrastructure, increasing costs for repairs and maintenance.
- **Strain on staff and volunteer capacity** - Many charities faced challenges retaining staff and volunteers, with increased living costs cited as a contributing factor.

5.10 Senior staff changes (2021 – 2022)

Between 2021 and 2022, Newcastle City Council experienced a **period of leadership turnover**, with several senior officers retiring and resigning. This included the Chief Executive (2021), Assistant Director of Transformation (2022), Director of Public Health (2022), and the Director of Regeneration,

who also served as Interim CEO in early 2022. Notably, all had been advocates for the Parks Trust model and had played key roles in its initial development and implementation.

The loss of key senior leaders in NCC may have contributed to a loss of institutional memory, as well as commitment to the model. With several key champions of the model no longer in post, it is likely that internal advocacy for UGN may have weakened. Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt this may have affected the council's capacity to provide support in navigating some of the challenges.

During this time there was also staff turnover within UGN. The departure of the UGN Chief Executive in September 2021 created a further change at a critical time. Due to recruitment challenges, there was a 10-month gap before the new CEO was in post, in July 2022. This period coincided with increasing pressures on the financial model, including the ongoing fallout from the pandemic, the impact of Storm Arwen, and the emerging cost of living crisis.

5.11 Political changes (2022 to 2024)

In addition to senior staff changes, the period from 2022 to 2024 was marked by significant political change within Newcastle City Council, driven largely by internal tensions within the local Labour Party, culminating in a series of high-profile resignations and leadership changes. A notable change was when Councillor Forbes, the leader of the council, stepped down in May 2022 after being deselected by the Labour Party from his seat in Arthurs Hill.

Councillor Kemp took over as leader of the council in May 2022 and as part of his leadership campaign, committed to undertake *“reviews of Your Homes Newcastle and the council's relationship with Urban Green”*.¹⁰ Stakeholders involved in the evaluation told us that Councillor Kemp pledged to bring Your Homes Newcastle (council housing) and UGN back into Council control. Councillor Kemp resigned in September 2024 and his departure triggered a wave of resignations from the Labour group, with five other councillors leaving the party to sit as independents. This stripped Labour of its majority, leaving the council under no overall control. The deputy leader, Councillor Kilgour, stepped in as interim leader in September 2024 and was officially appointed as leader in October 2024.

These changes created a climate of uncertainty and a period of potential political instability, which had several implications for UGN:

¹⁰ <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/labour-chief-nick-kemp-pledges-23781689>

- **Loss of political champions** - Many of the councillors who left, or who were subsequently reshuffled, had been supporters of the UGN model. The stakeholders who participated in the evaluation felt that their absence weakened, or removed, internal advocacy for UGN and reduced its influence with council decision makers.
- During this time, the NCC Councillors that were appointed as trustees stopped attending the UGN Trustee Board meetings (from May 2022 onwards), stating that they couldn't attend due to a conflict of interest and then later that they felt it would be "inappropriate" while the review was being conducted (May 2024).¹¹ This was despite them being Nominated Trustees, nominated by NCC and required to attend as part of the UGN Articles of Association. The Trustee induction covered potential conflicts of interest in detail, and the UGN legal advisers confirmed that there were no concerns from their perspective. At this time, a senior officer from NCC attended in this role instead.
- **Policy ambiguity** - With shifting leadership and no clear majority, the council's ability to provide consistent strategic direction may have been hindered. This may have affected long-term planning and support for UGN.
- **Reassessment of governance models** - The changes within the Council may have undermined confidence in arms-length governance arrangements, prompting a shift back towards direct control. The 2024 review recommending the return of park management to the council can be seen as a response to this.

5.12 Communications and press coverage (ongoing)

From 2023, UGN faced increasing scrutiny in the local press, with a series of articles reporting on financial instability, governance concerns, and tensions with both the council and local communities. Coverage from ITV News, BBC, and the Evening Chronicle reported that UGN was facing a projected £6.7 million shortfall by 2029, having already spent its initial 10-year funding allocation by 2024.

The press also reported on controversies around event management and park maintenance. For example, UGN was criticised for damage caused during large scale festivals in Leazes Park, with some residents accusing the charity of treating the space as a "*cash cow*".¹² The subsequent loss of Green Flag status for Leazes and Walker Parks further contributed to negative perceptions. Many of these headlines were as a result of discussion in open Council meetings, including Scrutiny Committee meetings, where members of the local media attended.

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c988d3v1nv8o>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c3g9yl23x2yo>

Stakeholders involved in the evaluation felt that these headlines resulted in debate about the viability of the model and whether it offered value for money compared to direct council management. In response, UGN issued public statements highlighting achievements such as increased income generated and successful capital projects. However, UGN **struggled to shift the narrative**.

Communication efforts from UGN were often reactive rather than proactive, due to a lack of resources, and the absence of consistent political champions within the council made it harder to counteract the criticism. These communication challenges likely had several consequences, including the negative headlines contributing to a perception of mismanagement. Councillors facing pressure internally became more cautious in their support of UGN and the negative communication also impacted on staff morale.

5.13 Review of UGN and Cabinet decision (July to November 2024)

In July 2024, NCC commissioned a review of UGN's performance across the first five years of operation and presented options for the future management of Newcastle parks and allotments.

The review concluded that *“UGN would need significant funding from the council for the foreseeable future. This is due to higher than expected costs (e.g. additional repairs required because of vandalism and higher health and safety related costs due to regulatory compliance changes) and lower than expected income to fund the core running costs of the park. The latter is partly due to Covid, which had a significant impact on UGN's income generation, but also due to Licencing Committee's decision to restrict the number of high impact events in Leazes Park and Exhibition Park, in comparison with the number of events assumed in the original business case. New income streams envisaged in the original business were also not achieved.”*¹³

The review reported that the reasons for establishing an independent charity to manage parks and allotments are still relevant to the Council today and that the financial model was naïve in estimating the number of revenue streams that could be generated and underestimated the cost of maintaining the parks.

Following the review, NCC decided at a Cabinet meeting in November 2024 that the parks and allotments would transfer back into the Council. This was not based on a financial decision and the

¹³ Ibid

Cabinet report of 25 November 2024 notes that it *“was made clear that without further financial support from the council, UGN would be forced to hand back the land and property assets to the council as it would be unable to bear the financial burden of maintaining and managing these assets”*.¹⁴

The Cabinet report noted that the return of parks and allotments to the Council would result in additional costs, and a potential reduction in grant funding that is only accessible to charities. It also stated that *“the level of annual funding needed to support day to day park management if it transfers to the council has been initially estimated at £1.5m, however, this amount may increase”* and that improvements to the parks will *“will require additional resources to be invested over and above the £1.5m required to maintain the current level of service, and these resources will need to be funded from savings elsewhere in the council’s budget”*.¹⁵

6. The target operating model and financial model

This chapter includes an assessment of the target operating model (TOM) and financial model and retrospectively assesses the model in Newcastle. The analysis considers the first five years, as the final year (2024/25) was incomplete, due to the return to the Council, and is therefore not supported by audited accounts.

6.1 The TOM and financial model summary

The financial model behind the transition to UGN was founded on the assumption that new commercial income streams would offset a reduced level of financial support from NCC and lead to financial sustainability over a ten year period, by 2029. The original model shaping the UGN operations is summarised below:

- A 10-year model with an objective for UGN to be self-financing by 2029.
- A financial contribution from NCC between 2019-2029 of £9.4m (subsequently reduced to £7.7m due to VAT requirements) which reduced gradually over time.
- The potential loan for capital investment of £0.6m. This loan was not used.

¹⁴

<https://democracy.newcastle.gov.uk/documents/s204814/5.%20Future%20Management%20of%20Parks%20and%20Allotments.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid

- A recommendation of an endowment of £15m to £20m to provide £375,000 to £500,000 annual income. This was not implemented.
- Envisaged revenues at year 10 from:
 - events (40%), made up of 150 small events, 6 large events and one large winter wonderland event,
 - parking (25%), made up of additional spaces plus increased parking fees,
 - cafes/retail (13%), with assumptions based on adding eight concessions to the portfolio,
 - commercial property (10%), made up of increased rents and more spaces brought into use,
 - allotments (2%), which assumed 100 more plots built and a 10% increase in allotment rates, and
 - grants/donations (10%).
- TUPE of 19 staff.
- Extensive SLAs for services between UGN and NCC, including operational (waste collection, grass cutting) and back office support (HR, payroll, IT).

6.2 Challenges of the financial model

The success of the model was determined by a range of factors and challenges. Some of these challenges may have been visible at the start of the transition, while others only became apparent as the model became operational.

Income analysis

Analysis of revenue data across 2020-24 reveals that UGN generated £6.799m of income in the five years to 2024. This included £3.67m of grants and although the majority of these grants were ringfenced for specific projects, they did provide a contribution to the core costs. The financial model forecast income generation of £6.546m, and UGN achieved 104% of the income forecast. This was largely due to overperformance in fundraising from grants. Key points to note on income include:

There was a higher than forecast income from:

- Car parking (142% of target) which represents a gain of £0.334m over five years.
- Café sales, retail etc. (116% of target) which represents a gain of £91,000 over five years.

There was a lower than forecast income from:

- Events and licencing (26% of target) which represents a shortfall of £1.152m over five years.
- Property leases achieved 69% of target.
- Allotments achieved 71% of target.

Retrospective analysis of the financial model reveals a range of **optimistic assumptions** on future revenue generation, particularly relating to commercial income, which became vulnerable to some of the unforeseen circumstances and challenges. Significant increases were forecast in existing revenue areas including events and commercial property, and new revenue streams around health services, renewable energy installations, woodland burials, training, licensing, and corporate sponsorship.

The table below presents the baseline year and year five assumption for income generation for **some** of the **existing revenue streams**.

| | 2018 actual | Year 5 (2023) forecast | Increase over first five years |
|---------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Existing revenue streams | | | |
| Events | £17,000 | £485,796 | 2757% |
| Cafes, retail and concessions | £26,000 | £143,531 | 452% |
| Car parking | £15,000 | £165,612 | 1004% |
| Allotments | £91,000 | £122,553 | 35% |

As can be seen in the table, above, the model projected uplifts in several existing income streams, with year-on-year increases. The increases in the first five year period are shown in the table above for some of the areas, showing that in these areas the levels of growth were significant. In developing the financial model, the market analysis benchmarked data with evidence of comparable performance elsewhere but obviously did not consider the, at the time unknown, external factors including the pandemic, event licensing restrictions, the cost of living crisis, and storms.

In hindsight, these assumptions were overly optimistic in some areas, and while it is valuable to set stretching targets, the scale of the anticipated growth outpaced what was operationally and commercially viable, particularly in the absence of substantial upfront investment for some of the buildings, as well as the capacity of UGN to develop these revenue streams while dealing with the external events. Despite the model's ambitious projections, there were many areas of encouraging progress, including car parking and cafes and many income streams showed improvements over time, with positive steps taken to enhance revenue.

The table below shows some of the new income streams that did not gain traction, such as woodland burials, and it is clear that some of these assumptions were not borne out in practice. There could have been a misalignment between the scale of projected income and the capacity of UGN to commercialise the estate, with limited infrastructure or capacity in place to support the level of commercial activity assumed in the model, within the first five years, along with the impact of external factors on the ability to commercialise.

| | 2018 actual | Year 5 (2023) forecast |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| New revenue streams | | |
| Pay to Play | 0 | £55,205 |
| Renewable energy installation | 0 | £66,245 |
| Woodland burial | 0 | £38,643 |
| Health services | 0 | £82,806 |
| Education and training provision | 0 | £110,408 |

In summary, the table below shows the income forecast (£6.546m) against the actual income achieved (£6.799m), which is 104% of the target.

| Income | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | Total |
|----------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Forecast | 697 | 1,041 | 1,309 | 1,586 | 1,913 | 6,546 |
| Actual | 855 | 1,182 | 1,586 | 2,197 | 1,428 | 6,799 |

The Newcastle City Council subsidy is shown in the table below:

| NCC subsidy | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | Total |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Forecast | 2,175 | 1,872 | 1,644 | 1,406 | 1,120 | 8,217 |
| Actual | 2,013 | 1,137 | 1,776 | 1,235 | 977 | 7,138 |

As can be seen, while NCC brought more subsidy into the earlier years, the overall subsidy in the first five years was less than was forecast, at 86.9% of the total. Note this does not include expenditure in the final year of UGN, before the transition back to the council.

Expenditure analysis

Analysis of expenditure data across 2020-24 reveals that costs increased steadily year-on-year between 2020-23 before falling during 2024. The total expenditure figure across the five years to 2024 was £12.811m, which was £2.668m more than the forecast of £10.143m (126% of forecast budget).

| Expenditure | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | Total |
|------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Forecast | 1,961 | 1,966 | 2,029 | 2,503 | 2,095 | 10,143 |
| Actual | 1,994 | 2,308 | 2,503 | 3,085 | 2,921 | 12,811 |
| As a % of the forecast expenditure | 102% | 117% | 123% | 150% | 139% | 126% |

Key points to note include that there was a significant year-on-year increase in salaries and oncosts from £0.827m in 2020 to £1.276m in 2023, outstripping the growth outlined in the TOM, before falling to £0.956m in 2024. This was as UGN tried to build the capacity within the team to respond to the operational requirements.

There was also a substantial increase in repairs and maintenance costs from £77,000 in 2020 to £589,000 in 2024, in response to the pandemic, condition of the estate and the urgent tree maintenance work. Actual repairs and maintenance costs are shown below.

| Actual costs | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Repairs and maintenance | £77,000 | £861,000 | £755,000 | £520,000 | £589,000 |

In addition, the properties controlled by UGN included a significant number requiring security and maintenance to keep them safe and secure, with significant investment required to bring them back into use, and a limited income derived from the property portfolio as a whole.

A large proportion of the expenditure over the five years was through SLAs and other procured services with the Council, including grass cutting, waste management, tree works and back office support, with a large proportion of the Council subsidy returned in SLA payments. There was a feeling among some of the participants in the evaluation that more competitive services could have been procured in the open market, in some cases. However, there was an expectation from the Council that the SLAs and procured services would continue, as they supported the Council to raise revenue and meet broader budget targets.

Impact of Covid-19 on the financial model

The loss of income from Covid-19 was significant. In other areas, Leeds forecast a loss of £8.8m or over 50% of its parks income budget whilst Rugby Borough Council lost 87% of its projected income.¹⁶ In addition, evidence shows that many parks continued to report a loss of income in the years after

¹⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/financial-impact-covid-19-parks-2020-21-case-study-key-findings>

the Covid-19 related social distancing (March 2020 to July 2021) linked to ongoing safety work and reduced visitor spending.¹⁷

During this time, the value of in-kind volunteer hours was also significantly reduced while the operational costs increased significantly linked to PPE, signage and enhanced cleaning requirements, along with increased littering and anti-social behaviour. Costs were encountered associated with delays with capital projects, staff redeployment and maintenance build-ups.

Analysis of UGN's financial position at the end of the pandemic ¹⁸ highlighted the scale of the impact in terms of **a fall in commercial income of approximately a third**, generating a shortfall on the TOM forecasts as UGN fell behind the initial target. The specific costs of the pandemic, during March 2020 through to July 2021 when the majority of restrictions were lifted, covered three significant decreases in revenue streams reflected in revenue data between the financial years of 2020 and 2021:

- Income from property leases reduced by £186,000 in the financial years 2020 to 2021.
- Café sales and events revenue reduced to zero across the whole of 2021, resulting in a minimum loss of £69,000.
- Car parking reduced by 52%, losing a further £64,000 of revenue for 2021.

In addition to the decrease in income, **costs for UGN also increased** during and after the pandemic with:

- Salaries increasing by 13%, as a result of additional recruitment.
- Repairs and maintenance costs increasing by 72% from 2020 to 2021.
- Specialist fees and costs increased from £9,000 to £124,000.

Impact of Storm Arwen on the financial model

The estimated costs of the damage caused by Storm Arwen exceeded £60,000 with over 30,000 hectares of woodland damaged and around 400 trees uprooted or damaged requiring over 100 workdays and delaying other programmes. Storms Malik and Corrie brought down a further 100 trees, and damaged fencing and other infrastructure.

¹⁷

https://lga.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s30433/201209%20Board%20paper_Financial%20Impact%20of%20COVID%2019%20on%20Park%20Services.pdf

¹⁸ UGN Financial Position January 2022

6.3 Ongoing learning and development

A five-year business plan, commissioned by UGN in 2022/23 and prepared in partnership with The Cranfield Trust, focused on achieving sustainability from the period 2024-29. This was commissioned by UGN as they recognised early that the financial model was under pressure.

The revised business plan projected an operating deficit of £1.65m in 2024/25 falling to £1m in 2028/29, representing a cumulative deficit of £6.7m over the five years. The report stated that the cost of running parks and allotments is approximately £1.5m per year.

The report highlighted a raft of learning from the approach taken to financial planning, which was due to be taken forward in 2024 with Newcastle Business School, having secured funding from NLHF Resilience Fund, but was put on hold pending the Council's review. At this time, the learning points included:

- Using profit and loss forecasts rather than projections based on just net income.
- Focusing on the viability of individual activity areas by developing detailed business and funding plans.
- The need for a longer-term (20+ years) plan including investment finance in order to develop park assets, with a focus on buildings, to generate income and boost the scope for sustainability.

The analysis underpinning the revised business plan found a need for significant investment in property, suggesting a property development budget of £5m, and staff to support increased business activity, facilitate sustainability from events, car parks and, in the medium term, donations, philanthropy and grants.

6.4 Summary

In summary, UGN exceeded its overall income target, generating £6.799m against a forecast of £6.546m (104%). However, this was primarily due to success in grant fundraising, not commercial income. Some income streams outperformed forecasts, including car parking (142%) and cafes/retail (116%). However, major shortfalls occurred in events (26%), commercial property (69%) and allotments (71%). Many of the forecasted new income streams (e.g. woodland burials, renewable energy) were not achieved.

Total expenditure was £12.811m, which is significantly over the £10.143m forecast (126%), and increased costs were seen primarily in staffing and repairs and maintenance. Analysis of the financial model reveals an underestimate of costs, linked to the condition of the estate and increased costs due to the pandemic and storms, as well as an overestimate of revenue growth from existing and new commercial income streams, which were difficult to achieve due to the pandemic and licensing restrictions. This was offset, in part, by better performance with fundraising from grants.

The UGN financial model was optimistic and didn't account for operational limitations and external shocks. During the first five years, UGN was not self-sufficient without the subsidy from NCC between 2020-23 and produced a loss in 2024 even with a £977,000 subsidy. At the end of the five-year period to 2024 there was a £1,229m deficit between the forecast and actual net income.

The scale and scope of the task facing UGN at the beginning of the transition period should not be underestimated. The operational model represented a broadening of activities from those supported through NCC. Some of the challenges which undermined the success of the model included:

- Addressing under investment in repairs and maintenance as well as greater than envisaged urgent tree maintenance work, followed by storm damage resulting in significantly increased costs.
- Repairing and refurbishing buildings and spaces which include raising finance, managing construction, and maximising future income generation.
- Difficulties in obtaining the events licences to deliver more commercial events, resulting in revenue from events being £1.1m below target.
- Designing and implementing a philanthropy, grants and corporate sponsorship function.
- Some of the new income streams identified in the TOM were difficult to implement, (e.g., woodland burials), within a limited timescale.
- Unforeseen increases in insurance premiums and back-office costs relating to a small, independent charity.

The short period of 'normal' operating time available to UGN, before the pandemic, left insufficient time to fully commercialise. There were, however, signs of improvement in financial performance throughout the five years of operation of UGN.

7. Conclusions

This chapter draws on the evidence from the document reviews and qualitative interviews, presented in previous chapters, and presents conclusions regarding UGN's successes and achievements, barriers and challenges.

The benefits derived from engaging with green spaces and services across health and individual wellbeing, community wellbeing, (e.g., pride in place), community cohesion, and climate resilience is well-documented. Meanwhile, the pressure experienced by councils nationally to find innovative solutions to the management and funding of parks and green spaces has been increasing for over 20 years. Nationally, there have been many years of:

- Short-term grants.
- Uneven investment, as parks in some areas benefit from more proactive fundraising and higher-level/skilled volunteering input.
- A lack of recognition of the green infrastructure in public budgets given the necessary focus on statutory services during austerity.
- The lack of priority given to ongoing repairs and maintenance costs in capital grants.
- A growing reliance on voluntary and community sector organisations to 'plug gaps' in capacity.

Newcastle City Council demonstrated vision and leadership in establishing Urban Green Newcastle, recognising the need for an innovative approach to managing the City's parks and green spaces at that time. NCC also provided valuable practical and strategic support beyond the formal agreements, particularly during crises such as Covid-19 and Storm Arwen. Key teams, including waste, arboriculture, countryside and ecology, public health, and youth engagement, collaborated effectively with Urban Green Newcastle. NCC also played a critical role in resolving funding issues and supporting local initiatives, including youth engagement and biodiversity net gain work.

7.1 Key successes of the UGN model

When UGN was established in 2019, it was underpinned by a strong spirit of collaboration and mutual ambition, built on a relationship of trust and a shared vision to create a sustainable model for managing the City's parks and allotments. This vision was supported by a significant cohort of senior council officers, elected members, and trustees who were aligned in their belief that a Parks Trust

model could unlock new funding opportunities, drive innovation, and protect green spaces from the pressures of austerity.

The scale of the task facing UGN should not be underestimated. UGN was successful at managing and improving 33 parks, 61 allotments, and 57 buildings, and delivering visible improvements across the City's green estate. Maintenance standards were sustained through routine work and enhanced by the introduction of a **digital asset management system**. Capital improvements included refurbished tennis courts, upgraded football pitches, and improved accessibility and biodiversity along key sections of Hadrian's Cycleway.

UGN **embedded environmental sustainability** into its operations, restoring habitats, planting over 12,000 trees, and delivering major biodiversity projects such as Beelines North East, which created pollinator-friendly habitats across 45 sites and engaged young people through training and education.

Community engagement was a central pillar of UGN's approach. Over **6,900 volunteer hours** were logged in the past year, with active Friends Groups and new community partnerships helping deliver events, clean-up days, and park improvements. A **Volunteer Handbook, Allotments Handbook** and **Urban Green Connect** strengthened local governance and input.

UGN's vibrant **cultural and wellbeing programme** included seasonal events such as the Northern Lights Trail, outdoor cinemas, and wellbeing walks. Springbank Pavilion was transformed into a creative hub for NHS staff, patients, and local residents.

The added value of the new model led to a wider range of resources to support a variety of opportunities. Strategic partnerships and **strong fundraising efforts resulted in £3.67 million** secured through 49 grants and donations, supporting infrastructure, accessibility, biodiversity, and community programming. UGN also pioneered opportunities to generate income through Biodiversity Net Gain.

Stakeholders involved in the evaluation also felt that the introduction of UGN provided a change in mindset in terms of the breadth of parks, allotments and green space provision. This included enhanced partnership working and activities to tackle previously under represented areas of activity and new themes.

As an independent charity, UGN has established robust governance structures and transparent operations. Participation in the Future Parks Accelerator programme further supported its development, helping to shape a model for sustainable urban green space management.

7.2 Key challenges faced by UGN

At its inception, UGN benefited from significant political capital, not just in terms of formal endorsement, but through the informal networks, goodwill, and strategic alignment. While there was not a unanimous commitment, senior Council officers and members actively championed UGN.

A series of **external events** including the pandemic, Storm Arwen, the cost of living crisis and challenges with licensing for events, all impacted negatively on the financial model, exposing the fragility of a model that depended heavily on earned income, with costs increasing and opportunities to commercialise reduced.

This was followed by substantial **staffing changes** and **political changes** within the council. Between 2021 and 2024, several key senior individuals who had been instrumental in shaping and supporting UGN left their posts. These departures coincided with internal changes within the local Labour Party, leadership turnover, and a loss of continuity. There were also changes in staffing at UGN, further impacting on the working relationships.

These changes occurred as UGN was entering a critical financial phase. The lack of continuity at senior levels may have complicated partnership working and contributed to uncertainty. Without consistent champions or advocates, UGN found it increasingly difficult to maintain influence and navigate emerging challenges. The original sense of joint ownership gave way to a more transactional relationship, with trust and alignment gradually eroded.

This **loss of political capital** had tangible consequences for UGN. It weakened the ability to advocate for the Parks Trust model, reduced its visibility in key decision making forums, and contributed to a growing perception within the council that UGN was operating in isolation. Ultimately, this shift in dynamics played a significant role in the 2024 review that recommended returning park management to the council.

Many stakeholders participating in the evaluation felt that the **size and scale of the estate was vast**, and UGN, as a small independent, newly formed charity, was under pressure to manage, improve and develop the estate.

The short period of time available to UGN did not give scope to fully capture the direct impacts and potential of the new model. The indirect impacts are hard to capture in the short term and may be reflected in cost savings across a range of public partner balance sheets rather than revenue linked to

UGN. It is difficult to assess the full potential of the Parks Trust model in Newcastle, and the role of UGN within that, given the early cessation of UGN operations.

7.3 What could have been done differently?

There are a number of things that, on reflection, could have done differently during the planning and transition, as well as during the operational phase. Based on discussions with staff, trustees and stakeholders, the following areas have been identified:

During the feasibility, development and handover, there are a number of things that could have been done differently, including:

- Ensuring that the condition of all transferred assets was more accurately and consistently recorded, including buildings, trees and other infrastructure, to improve understanding of the level of maintenance and associated risks, and the ensuring this was accurately represented in the financial model.
- Developing a more cautious and **flexible financial model** that allowed for unexpected costs or under performance in income, with contingency funds built into the business plan to manage risks such as vandalism, storm damage or emergency repairs.
- Recognising that insurance, legal, HR and IT costs can be disproportionately higher for a smaller independent organisation and building these into the financial model.
- Planning for changes in council policy that could affect income generation (e.g. licensing restrictions) or responsibilities (e.g. the tree management policy) that would have been difficult to factor into the financial planning.
- Exploring and verifying the opportunities to generate income from appropriate buildings and spaces (e.g. venue hire, pop-up cafés, concessions), to **ensure that the financial model was operationally viable**, with input from staff and/or advisors with relevant operational expertise in the relevant areas.
- In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to have **mechanisms for financial or operational support** from the local authority in the event of unplanned or exceptional risks or crisis arising post-transfer. This could include emergency protocols, shared responsibility clauses, or access to specialist support. This did happen but was on an ad hoc basis.
- For a complex initiative, like UGN, it would have been beneficial to create a **shadow organisation** made up of individuals with senior operational experience and sector expertise. For UGN this would mean a shadow organisation would function alongside NCC, offering

strategic challenge of the financial model and risk management advice, prior to the transfer. This could have enabled UGN to delay, decline or renegotiate elements such as the **transfer of derelict or unusable buildings** unless there was confirmed funding for repairs or redevelopment, or security, available. Although the trustee board was in place for around six months before the transfer, their focus was on governance and strategic matters, rather than operational issues.

- It would have also been beneficial to work closely with the council's legal team to put in place clearer and updated lease agreements for tenants before or immediately after transfer, as there were some complex leases and covenants in place.
- While the feasibility work was lengthy and robust, in hindsight the UGN Board **and** senior team required more time to **independently review the due diligence**, prior to the transfer.
- A **staggered start** with assets transferred over to UGN on phased basis, would have enabled UGN to build capacity and develop plans for commercialisation, as well as redevelopment of buildings.

Once operational, there are a number of things that could have been done differently, including:

- A clearer **stakeholder engagement strategy** would have helped to build a stronger understanding of UGN's role, value, and challenges among councillors, senior officers, and other key stakeholders within NCC. This would have needed dedicated capacity or resource, rather than being absorbed into wider delivery roles within UGN. More sustained investment in relationships with elected members and officers could have improved support, helping to secure advocacy and shared ownership. NCC should have ensured continuity and full engagement of nominated Councillor Trustees, so that they had a shared ownership in the future direction of the charity. A more collaborative, less transactional operational relationship with the local authority may have prevented misunderstandings or misaligned expectations and supported UGN when there was a change in political leadership.
- An **Advisory Committee** made up of senior operational staff in UGN and NCC would have enabled relationships to be maintained and operational issues to be discussed and resolved outside of the more formal governance mechanisms of Trustee Board meetings and NCC Scrutiny Committee meetings.
- Improved and more consistent **communication** with local residents and community groups could have helped build trust, transparency, and a sense of shared purpose. Again, this would have needed dedicated resources.

7.4 Could this Parks Trust model have worked in Newcastle?

This is a difficult question to answer definitively. Different variations of Parks Trust models, with dedicated, independent organisations managing parks, allotments and green spaces at arm's length from the local authority have worked very well in some areas, however success is highly dependent on local conditions and the specific operational and financial models.

In Newcastle, many variables have influenced the viability of the Parks Trust model. These include:

- the scale of the estate and the condition at the point of transfer,
- the ability to commercialise assets,
- a series of unforeseen events (e.g. pandemic, cost of living crisis, extreme weather events) in close succession to each other,
- staff continuity and policy changes,
- the level of funding available and the capacity of a small organisation,
- maintaining a supportive partnership approach.

Income generation was strong relative to the original forecasts, however there remained a structural imbalance between income and expenditure. In practice, annual expenditure consistently exceeded the assumptions within the financial model, with spending ranging from 102% of target (19/20) to 150% of target (22/23).

UGN's actual expenditure was 126% of forecast over the full five years of operation, although comparisons with the financial position prior to the transfer were favourable. This expenditure pattern shows that the **financial model was under significant pressure from the outset**. This was due to **both** increased costs and reduced income.

There may have been potential for long-term financial sustainability, if favourable conditions had aligned. This would have included more financial security through the provision of an endowment or a similar underpinning financial mechanism, uninterrupted event delivery, increased car parking revenue, income generating use of buildings, and more commercial contracts for external services such as grass cutting.

The **negative impact of external events**, including the pandemic, cost of living crisis and storms, all increased costs. These events, in close succession, were all handled well by UGN, but this, together

with the **condition of the estate**, meant that the team were always ‘**firefighting**’ and did not have the capacity to commercialise some of the assets that were expected.

The cumulative impact of several external events and operational challenges, alongside UGN being a new, small charity with no financial reserves, left little room to absorb these ‘shocks’. The absence of formal contingency arrangements or a shared risk protocols meant that UGN was financially vulnerable.

UGN recognised this vulnerability and commissioned The Cranfield Trust to review future funding in 2022 and the report recognised the **fragility of the financial model** and the lack of a buffer to manage unforeseen costs, stating that *“It is highly unlikely that the net incomes projected in the TOM will be achieved”*.

In hindsight, a **different approach to financial contingency planning**, including mechanisms for emergency support or transitional funding, might have strengthened the resilience of UGN and improved the organisation’s ability to respond to these external pressures.

The political and policy changes in 2022 meant that the UGN model was not given sufficient time to mature and adapt. A **longer period**, ideally in advance of the original 10 years, would have allowed for a more thorough testing of the financial model and its assumptions. This would have better reflected the complexity and ambition of the model. However, Urban Green Newcastle’s ability to demonstrate impact was constrained by the early stage of its development and the limited time available to embed its approach.

8. Key lessons

This chapter brings together insights from the Urban Green Newcastle experience to highlight key lessons that may inform the development of Parks Trust models elsewhere.

The learning covers the creation of the model, governance, operational delivery, and financial sustainability. A central theme running across many of these is the importance of having sufficient time, specialist expertise, and dedicated resources in place from the outset.

Undertake comprehensive due diligence. This should include conducting full asset condition surveys of infrastructure and land prior to transfer. This would ensure a Parks Trust inherits a clear and costed understanding of its responsibilities and can plan accordingly. Crucially, this needs to be done in a way that enables the new organisation, and both senior staff and trustees, the ability to review this in advance of agreeing the transfer date, with relevant independent experts involved.

Formalise the partnership. A Memorandum of Understanding, Services Agreement or Partnership Agreement, as appropriate, which includes shared values, roles, expectations and dispute resolution mechanisms would protect both the Parks Trust and the local authority in the event of unforeseen challenges.

Stress testing the financial model. A key lesson from the Urban Green Newcastle experience is the importance of developing a robust, flexible financial model that is rigorously stress tested, with relevant operational input, before implementation. Stress testing financial assumptions under a range of scenarios, including economic downturns, inflationary pressures, and reduced grant availability, would help to identify vulnerabilities and build resilience into the model. Using conservative projections for income generation in the early years of operation could prevent over-reliance on commercial income streams until they become proven and stable. Establishing a ring-fenced contingency budget to manage unexpected costs, such as storm damage, reduces the risk of service disruption and limits the need for emergency funding.

Consider options for a guaranteed income stream. To increase long-term financial sustainability and reduce reliance on short term or restricted grants, potential Parks Trust areas should consider options for generating a guaranteed and unrestricted income stream. This could include an endowment (raising or allocating capital that can be invested, with interest or dividends used to fund core costs or strategic priorities) or a commercial income stream, for example, through renting out buildings. This type of income is flexible and unrestricted and can be reinvested in service development or used to cover gaps in restricted funding.

A staggered start. Piloting the Parks Trust model with a smaller number of parks or functions before scaling up would allow time to build capacity, test systems, and refine governance arrangements. For UGN, transferring the whole estate on day one meant that staff and trustees were establishing a new

organisation, while trying to maintain 'business as usual' with little or no systems in place, and planning and prioritising improvements and commercial opportunities.

Understand the loss of economies of scale. When services are transferred from a local authority to an independent charity or trust, the new organisation may lose access to the council's economies of scale in areas such as legal services, insurance premiums, HR, IT and payroll systems, procurement and bulk purchasing. This can lead to higher overheads for the new organisation. To mitigate this budget forecasts must be realistic and should account for higher unit costs. Consideration can be given to whether any shared services agreements or transitional support from the council can be negotiated, in recognition that small organisations may struggle to access affordable professional services.

Back office support. One area that could be considered is the local authority providing back office support, either indefinitely or for a defined period of time, to support the transition to a new organisation. Establishing finance, payroll, HR and back office systems is time consuming, and may be better provided by a local authority, or another partner organisation. These costs should be built into the financial model and tested to ensure they are competitive.

Maximise access to new funding sources. Parks Trusts often have greater flexibility to apply for funding than local authorities. For example, Urban Green Newcastle was able to pursue new funding sources and grant funding unavailable to the Council. However, securing this income takes time, skilled staff and capacity, and this must be factored into early financial planning and recruitment.

Include safeguards to maintain continuity in the event of political or leadership change. A key lesson is the importance of embedding safeguards to maintain continuity in the event of political or leadership change. New organisations, particularly those delivering public services, can be vulnerable to shifts in political priorities. To mitigate this risk, it is essential to establish clear governance structures, long-term agreements, and shared accountability frameworks that transcend individual leadership. Formalising roles and responsibilities through legal agreements or memoranda of understanding can help protect the organisation. Embedding cross-party political support and maintaining regular engagement with elected members can also build shared ownership and reduce risk.

External and internal communications. A key lesson from the UGN experience is the need for a clear, adequately resourced communications strategy from the outset. Strong internal and external

communications help to build trust, transparency, and a shared understanding across stakeholder groups, including residents, volunteers, councillors and partner organisations. Effective internal communication supports staff alignment and cohesion, while external communication is essential for articulating the purpose, value, and progress. Dedicated expertise and capacity are required to manage communications proactively, ensuring key messages reach the right audiences through appropriate channels. Without this, there is a risk of misunderstandings which may lead to reduced public confidence and weakened stakeholder relationships during times of change or challenge.

Partnership working. Building and maintaining strong relationships with the local authority, Friends Groups, funders, and community organisations is essential to delivering shared outcomes and sustaining public trust. Prioritising regular communication, joint planning, and collaborative governance structures helps to align expectations. Embedding partnership working into the organisation's culture and operations, can enhance resilience and legitimacy. This, of course, comes with resource requirements and partnership working and communications will not be directly income generating.

One of the key lessons from the Urban Green Newcastle experience is the importance of involving existing local VCSE groups, such as Friends Groups, from the very beginning. These groups may have had a long-standing relationship with the council and often operated with a high degree of autonomy, sometimes informally or outside of formal agreements. To ensure a smooth transition Councils and new charities should **jointly** engage with these groups early, transparently, and respectfully, acknowledging their history and contributions. Joint planning, codes of conduct, and co-designed agreements can help clarify roles and responsibilities. Ideally these would be agreed and in place before a transfer to a Parks Trust.

Measuring impact beyond financial targets. While financial sustainability is essential, it does not fully capture the value that parks, and green spaces provide. Embedding a broader set of key performance indicators that reflect environmental and social, as well as economic outcomes, would help to articulate the impact and public value. This includes tracking volunteer engagement, biodiversity improvements, visitor satisfaction, and contributions to health and wellbeing. Some examples include:

- Improved quality and provision of green infrastructure and expansion or enhancement of parks, natural spaces, and green corridors.
- Improved health and wellbeing, including positive physical and mental health outcomes.

- Increased social inclusion and cohesion and more diverse and inclusive use of green space.
- Recognition in wider policy areas, with green space embedded in planning, health, education and other strategies.
- Increased accessibility and equitable distribution, with equitable access across communities.
- Increased climate resilience and environmental benefits, using green space to mitigate against climate change and ecological emergency.
- Placemaking and place keeping, with green spaces contributing to local identity and sustained community value.
- Economic benefits, including the value to the local economy and cost savings.
- Employment, training, and volunteering opportunities, including job creation and skills development.
- Increased use and engagement of green spaces.
- Educational benefits of green space for learning and skills
- Support for active travel, with integration of green infrastructure with walking and cycling routes.
- Agreement of a set of metrics to measure some or all of these based on learning from other Parks models.

Costs of establishing baseline measures and collecting and analysing monitoring data should be factored into the financial model and be proportionate to the size of the organisation.

Appendix one: Parks Trust models

This appendix summarises some of the alternative models for the management and funding of public parks in the UK, with a focus on charitable trust models. It outlines the remit, benefits, funding sources, and formation of selected Parks Trusts.

The Parks Trust, Milton Keynes

The Parks Trust in Milton Keynes was formed in 1992. It manages over 6,000 acres of green space across Milton Keynes, including parks, woodlands, lakes, river valleys, and landscaped areas. It is structured as an independent charity and is funded by a £20m endowment (land and commercial property) from the Milton Keynes Development Corporation. It generates an income from property rental, investments, events, and other activities. The benefit of this model is financial independence, via the endowment, and independence from local authority funding, which enables fundraising.

Nene Park Trust, Peterborough

The Nene Park Trust in Peterborough was formed in 1988, with a 999 year lease from Peterborough City Council. It manages Nene Park, a 700-hectare area of parkland, woodland, meadows, and lakes along the River Nene. It is structured as an independent charity, and is funded by an endowment model, with income from property, investments, commercial leases, car parking, events, and trading (e.g. café, retail, activity centres) **with the** commercial properties gifted at inception. This gives a stable financial base. In contrast to UGN, the Nene Park estate is primarily on one site.

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Parks Foundation

The Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Parks Foundation was formed in 2015. Its remit is to enhance parks and open spaces in the BCP area through charitable projects and donations, rather than managing the parks directly, which remains a local authority function. It is structured as an independent charity working in partnership with the council, who manage parks. All funding is from grants, donations, sponsorship, and public fundraising campaigns, with no council subsidy.

Heeley Trust, Sheffield

The Heeley Trust in Sheffield was formed in 1996 and park stewardship began in early 2000. Its remit is the community-led regeneration of Heeley People's Park and wider the neighbourhood assets. It is structured as a community development trust. Funding is from project grants, enterprise activity, venue hire, contracts, and trading.

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