

URBAN GREEN NEWCASTLE EVALUATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2025



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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