APSE Northern Region – From concrete to canopy

To: all UK authorities

1 About the event

On Wednesday 29 March 2026, APSE welcomed local councils from across the APSE Northern Region and sector experts to Preston Park in Stockton-on-Tees. The event themed on 'From concrete to canopy,' explored how local authorities are using nature-based solutions and high-quality green spaces to enhance community wellbeing and respond to climate change.

The event was chaired by Councillor Tracey Dixon, Leader of South Tyneside Council and APSE's National Chair and Northern Region Chair. This briefing provides an overview of the presentations delivered at the event.

2 Welcome address

Councillor Lisa Evans, Leader of Stockton-on-Tees Council, opened the event with a welcome address, outlining the history of Preston Park and the council's ambitions to transform Stockton-on-Tees from its industrial past into a place where people want to live, work and visit.

3 Restructuring Stockton – Stockton Waterfront Urban Park

Iain Robinson, Assistant Director for Town Centre Regeneration, outlined the Stockton Waterfront Urban Park as a flagship project within the wider "Restructuring Stockton" programme and a catalyst for transformational place change. The park is positioned as a strategic investment in the town centre and riverside, supporting a renewed focus on high-quality public realm, accessible green space, and a stronger sense of destination along the waterfront.

The presentation highlighted the park's main components, including Finkle Square, Finkle Gardens, dedicated play space, the Oval Lawn, an amphitheatre, and the waterfront. Together, these spaces support everyday use (informal recreation, play and relaxation) alongside events and civic activity, helping to animate the area across seasons and times of day.

A key takeaway was the focus on deliverable, visible changes that can rebalance how a town centre functions, prioritising people, landscape and public life alongside traditional regeneration levers. The presentation suggested that design quality and a clear spatial framework can build public confidence, increase footfall, and support wider economic and community outcomes linked to the town centre and river corridor.

4 Landscape-Led Solutions for Water Management

Seraya Sigsworth, Product Specification Manager at Green-tech Specifiers, argued for integrating water management with green infrastructure. She emphasised that Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) should be designed and governed across all four pillars: water quantity, water quality, amenity and biodiversity. The presentation also advocated a more circular approach—capturing and reusing rainwater on site, rather than treating it as waste to be conveyed away—supported by policy shifts such as stronger source control, explicit recognition of nature-based solutions, and requirements such as rainfall interception.

Key benefits highlighted for local areas included reduced surface-water flood risk; cooling during heatwaves; reduced pressure on combined sewer systems (including storm overflow events); improved water quality through filtration of polluted road runoff; and wider wellbeing and biodiversity gains from better-quality green space. These outcomes were linked to "sponge city" thinking: designing places to absorb, store, slow and cleanse rainfall through landscape and soil, rather than relying primarily on conventional "grey" drainage solutions.

The presentation then translated these concepts into practical interventions that local authorities and delivery partners can specify, including engineered SuDS tree pits (with defined soil volumes and water storage), bioretention soils, rain gardens, and green roofs as source-control measures that reduce and slow runoff. It also noted increasing climate volatility—with drought and flood risk occurring in parallel—and positioned rainwater harvesting and reuse (for example, for irrigation) as a cost- and resource-efficient adaptation measure, particularly where green infrastructure must perform under hotter, drier conditions.

5 Is the Land We Own and Manage Sequestering?

Margaret Enstone, Sustainability and Climate Change Lead, and Lauren Gibson, Ecologist, from Darlington Borough Council described the council's approach to aligning climate and nature work. They set out the progression from a 2019 climate emergency declaration (to be carbon neutral by 2050) to an accelerated net zero target of 2040, alongside a 2025 nature restoration emergency. The speakers outlined an emissions reduction trajectory (40% reduction every five years) and noted that residual emissions are likely to remain, creating an ongoing need to understand offsets and maximise co-benefits for residents, including physical and mental health gains from access to nature.

A central focus was the council's decision to assess whether land it owns and manages is sequestering carbon, and how this can be reflected in reporting, mirroring national approaches that account for land use alongside other emissions. The council commissioned a carbon audit (reported cost: £8,000) covering a substantial estate, including grassland, cultivated land, woodland, verges and individual trees. This was supported by questionnaires, site visits and soil sampling, and used a bespoke approach to estimating sequestration, including urban tree calculations that account for species and structural factors.

Initial results indicated estimated annual sequestration of 1,192.06 tCO2/year across the assessed categories, with soils representing a major carbon store. The presentation was also candid about data limitations, notably that an initial estimate of around 10,000 trees was incomplete; survey work suggested the true figure could be closer to 160,000, underlining the importance of good asset data for credible carbon accounting.

Next steps included trials of overseeding and clover on verges and grassland, continued tree surveying towards a 100,000-tree target by 2031, and repeat soil sampling in summer 2026 to confirm whether soils are net sequestering or emitting.

6 Wildflower meadows and soil types

Justin Smith, Director at Green Pigeon Consulting Limited, challenged conventional assumptions about what "natural beauty" looks like in managed landscapes, arguing that aesthetics are often an "unnatural" construct imposed on ecosystems. Using the idea that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", he encouraged audiences to view amenity spaces (parks, verges and lawns) not only as visual assets but as ecological systems shaped by soil conditions, management choices and trophic interactions.

A central theme was the contrast between "wildflower protagonism" and "trophic protagonism". Wildflower-led approaches typically prioritise immediate flower abundance and

a curated species mix, often maintained through high control and continuous intervention (notably cut-and-remove regimes intended to lower fertility). Trophic-led approaches prioritise long-term stability of energy flows and soil food-web function, accepting that visible abundance may be lower at times and favouring pulsed, corrective interventions (for example, short-term mixed grazing and organic matter return) that retain constraints and feedbacks within the ecosystem.

The presentation emphasised that "nature determines what nature looks like", because soil type, pH and fertility set strong boundaries on what plant communities can persist. It showed how mapping and diagnostics (such as soil nutrient testing, NDVI and soil organic carbon heat maps) can support site-appropriate decisions, rather than applying a generic wildflower mix. It also broadened the biodiversity objective beyond nectar and pollen by stressing the importance of larval host plants for butterflies and questioned whether deliberately reducing soil organic matter to achieve floristic goals can undermine soil ecology and carbon outcomes.

Citing research on grassland-to-wildflower meadow conversion, the presentation noted that highly disruptive establishment methods (such as turf removal) can reduce earthworm populations in the short term, while less disruptive approaches and mowing regimes can support soil biological activity. The practical message was to balance visible diversity with trophic function by minimising unnecessary soil disruption, avoiding long-term biomass removal without replenishment, and designing management that sustains soil life, resilience and carbon storage alongside above-ground biodiversity.

7 APSE Comment

The 'From concrete to canopy' event highlighted practical ways councils can embed nature-based solutions in regeneration and service delivery, linking high-quality parks and public realm with SuDS-led water management, biodiversity improvements and robust approaches to carbon accounting.

A consistent message across the presentations was that greener, more resilient places depend on strong local leadership, reliable asset and soil data, and design and management choices that balance amenity with long-term ecological function.

APSE welcomes the shared learning from across the Northern Region and will continue to support member authorities through networks, training, research and benchmarking as they scale up interventions that improve wellbeing and respond to climate and nature priorities. The ppresentations from the event are available online here.

For further information, please contact **Vickie Hacking**, APSE Principal Advisor, at vhacking@apse.org.uk

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