

# Our Borough

Mid and East Antrim Borough covers 400 square miles and is home to over 135,000 people, in 58,000 households

The Parks and Open Spaces Service manage over 300 sites including premier parks, play parks, woodlands, sports pitches, walkways, marinas, markets, allotments, 62 miles of coastline and cemeteries

There are 120 Parks and Open Spaces staff



# Cemetery Service

Mid and East Antrim Cemetery Service sits within the Parks and Open Spaces Service and consists of 20 staff managing 23 cemetery sites

11 of which are working sites and 12 of which are heritage sites which are closed to new burials

The 20 staff members are made up of Operations and Administration staff

The team manage approximately 850 burials per annum



# Sustainable community engagement

- Cemeteries important green space for community use
- Can be only green space available in built up areas
- Open 24 hours for pedestrian access
- Additional community engagement began organically 3 years ago
- Community supported to utilize space in a way that suits their needs
- Volunteers, schools, education, small events
- Quiet, respectful of site/s
- Benefits to Council - reduced ASB, good publicity, fulfils Community Plan
- Benefit to community – usable green space for exercise/peace and quiet/connecting with nature, sense of pride, accomplishment, new skills, new friends, improve their local area, physical and mental health benefits e.g. lower stress etc.

# Garden of Reflection

- £2000 PEACE IV funding
- Larne Little Snowdrops Baby Loss Support Group
- Memorial garden for those affected by still birth and neonatal death in the area
- Provides safe place for members to meet informally to share stories, socialize, learn new skills, enjoy therapeutic benefits of gardening
- 15m x 6 m with raised beds, seating areas, memorial features and sensory plants
- Staff initially cleared site. Staff and TCV worked with the group throughout 2020 to create the garden – woodworking, sowing, plant care, biodiversity, nest boxes etc.
- Ownership, sense of pride, accomplishment, new skills, improve their local area, physical and mental health benefits
- Community led initiative. Keen to support others in Borough





# Forest Schools

- Engage children to connect to nature in a respectful way through outdoor education
- Since 2016, 17 schools (500 pupils) complete the Forest School programme
- 17 teachers supported to train for Forest School Leader accreditation to ensure the sustainability of the programme
- A “cascading programme” whereby qualified Forest School teachers train other teachers within their school and mentor other schools
- Benefits to children include developing confidence, self-esteem, new skills, teamwork, health and wellbeing benefits from getting outside
- Research has shown that regular, ongoing and sustained use of Council green space helps to develop a sense of ownership and reduces ASB
- Templecorran became the first cemetery in the Borough to be used as a Forest School site in 2019.
- Worked well. School enjoyed sessions. Activities tailored to suit the nature of the site, children learning about heritage of site as well as activities such as wildlife ID, map reading and map making
- School-lead, school choose their FS site



# Educational

- Citizen Science
- Big Garden Birdwatch 2020 - 80 pupils visited the sites for wildlife walk, nest box building and bird court
- 18 different species of bird recorded including black bird, gold finches, mistle thrushes and robin. (Greenland & North Road) Boxes installed on site.
- Adopt a Spot – Victoria PS Eco Club litter picking site 4 times a year for 5 years (North Road)



# Community events

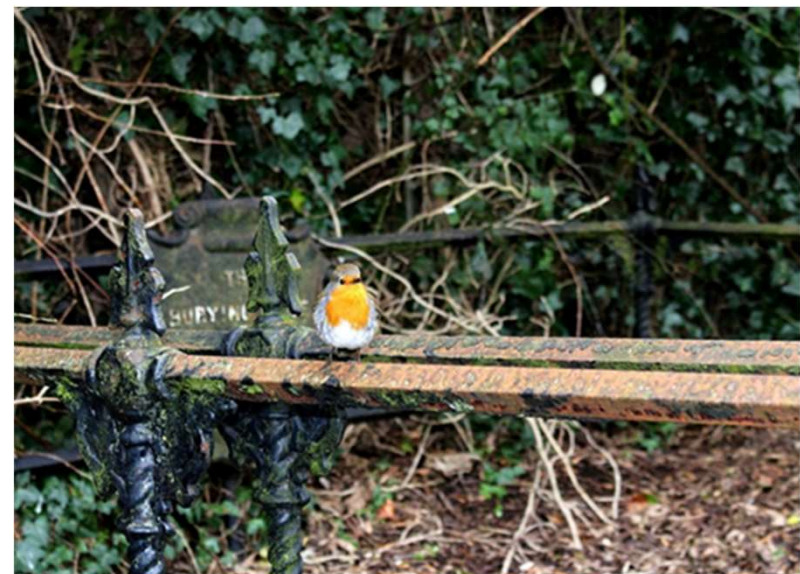
- Wildlife Walk
- Mindfulness Walk, as part of MEA Loneliness Network
- Historical Walks, Love Parks Week July
- Walks work well, quiet etc.
- FOC
- H&WB benefits
- Public aware these sites are useable





# Biodiversity

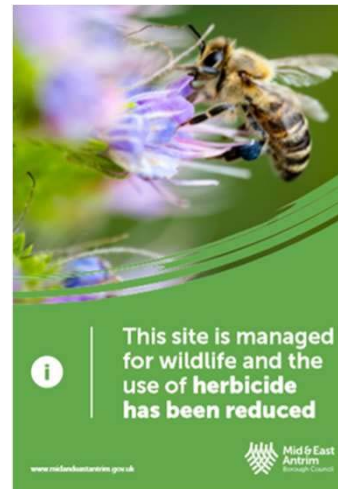
- Cemeteries can be a wildlife sanctuary, as they are not as intensely managed as other urban green spaces
- Habitat inc species-rich grassland, native woodland and hedgerow, stone walls, old buildings
- Bats, birds, lizard, frog
- Cemeteries should be included in LBAPs
- QUB placement student Jan to April 2021 - baseline studies, best practice research, final report on how we can improve biodiversity on our sites





# Biodiversity

- Trialing wildflower meadows on sites
- Cornflower mix (Victoria Cemetery) pictured. Positive feedback from public. Cut and lift
- From 1 April 2020 Council agreed a Herbicide Reduction Policy to reduce herbicide usage by 15% each year over the next 3 years (2020 to 2023) leading to a 45% reduction by 2023
- Herbicide is still used in cemeteries, mainly used on pathways due to (real or perceived) H&S risk and public perception. Signage on site. 2020 herbicide usage in cemeteries reduced by 50%
- MEA4Trees: 58,000 trees planted in the next 5 years, one tree for every household in the Borough, partnership w/ Woodland Trust
- Trees can reduce management required on site e.g. rather than cutting/spraying grass, volunteers/schools can weed and mulch young trees initially
- Does not effect operational site e.g. 2000 native hedging trees for Greenland Cemetery boundary





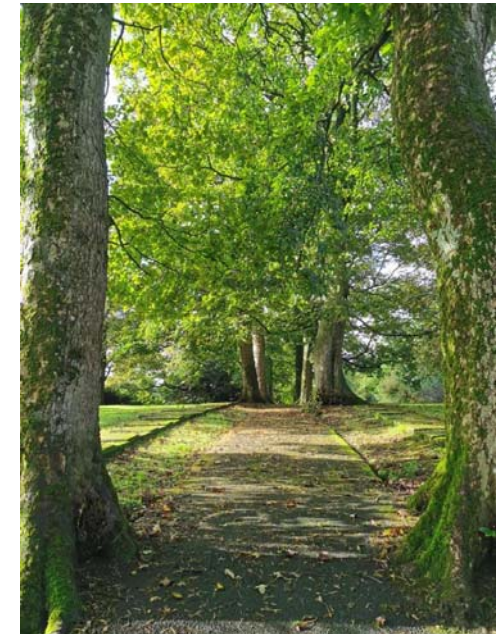
# Biodiversity

- Involving community
- Carrickfergus Mens Shed replacing oak trees
- North Road Community Orchard, planted with Acorn PS & Oakfield PS. 100 native apple, pear and plum trees. Signage. Free food for community.
- McGarel Community Orchard, planted with AEL & YMCA funded programme. 20 apple trees, tree care, cooking with apples etc.
- Ownership, sense of pride, accomplishment, new skills, physical and mental health benefits, can help Council look after site



# Funding

- £100,000+ Village Renewal funding secured for Gracehill Village & Gods Acre
- Gracehill is a settlement founded by the Moravians in 1765 and Northern Ireland's First Conservation area
- For Moravians, the burial ground was known as "Gods Acre" and had a strict layout. Men were buried to the left and women to the right of a central path. All the headstones were of the same shape and design - the Moravians believe that everyone is equal in death - and were laid almost flat on the ground
- Funding for construction of a walking loop around the village beginning and ending at God's Acre. Completed.
- Additional £2500 NHLT funding secured for interpretative signage and seating in Gods Acre plus a community walk programme
- Community assets for exercise, H&WB, quiet reflection
- Promotes site heritage
- Encouraging visitors, boost local economy
- Works in partnership with Gracehill Old School Trust & Village Association – community led





# Funding

- Currently exploring ideas to restore and open Church Street Graveyard, Ballymena, currently unsafe
- Busy town centre
- Usable public green space
- Promoting heritage and biodiversity
- Health and wellbeing benefits
- Encourage shoppers, boost local economy
- Plans inc restoring building/walls, Hoggin path, seating, lighting, native grassland & wildflowers
- £84,000 estimated costs



PROPOSED BOLLARD LIGHTING



PROPOSED BENCHING



WILDFLOWERS



CHURCH ST. CEMETERY - PROPOSED LAYOUT 1:100

CHURCH ST. CEMETERY - PROPOSED PATH VISUAL

# Positive feedback

- “The children love using their ‘outside classroom’ during their Forest School sessions and are very keen to get outside every week. I will be incorporating the activities in the year ahead.”  
Principal, Ballycarry PS
- “We thoroughly enjoyed our wildlife walk and nest box building experience. As a school we are aiming to achieve our Green Flag this year and biodiversity is one of the areas we are focusing on, and this gave us the opportunity to help improve our community.” Teacher, St Anthony’s PS
- “The pupils were delighted to be involved in this project as part their Shared Education programme. They had a great day out, enjoyed learning about fruit trees and carefully planting them and are very much looking forward to the development of this exciting space and are keen to be involved along the way.” – Teacher, Acorn PS
- “Little Snowdrops Baby Loss Support Group is an initiative developed by a community midwife and two bereaved Larne families, distraught by the lack of support for those tragically affected by still birth and neonatal death in the area. We are delighted that Mid and East Antrim Council have provided a plot of land for a reflection garden. Both the group and garden are open to all families who have been affected, regardless of gender, age, religion and when their loss occurred. We hope this will go some way in overcoming the isolation and stigma associated with baby loss, while offering a safe and supportive environment. It has been wonderful for people to come together in the garden and we’re looking forward to more get-togethers on site soon.” Ann Beggs, garden volunteer

# Recent achievements

- Green Flag Award for Greenland Cemetery
- Shortlisted for “Best Cemetery Team” at 2020 APSE Service Awards
- Cemetery sites included in Bloom routes – Ahoghill/Cullybackey
- 57 x awards at BIB, UIB, Irelands Best Kept





# Future plans

- Following best practice visits to sites in 2020
- There are currently no café facilities on any Council cemetery sites. Trial tea and coffee provision via local business. Option for socialising with family members during visit, option to sit on longer and enjoy site
- Potentially on key dates e.g. Mother's Day, Easter Saturday. Gather feedback and progress accordingly
- Pond/wetland areas for biodiversity
- Design new signage/digital content for key sites to include information on biodiversity and heritage to improve visitor experience and link sites across Borough as part of a trail
- Potential new 90ha site, developed with best practice learning in mind
- 40ha of site for H&WB, biodiversity – walking loop, woodland, wildlife pond, seating, gardens etc. to create useable community green space.

