

River Wansbeck trial aims to improve water quality

This will affect the river from Sheepwash Weir downstream to Wansbeck Barrage, also known locally as Wansbeck Weir.

The long-term aim of the project is to improve the ecology of Wansbeck Lake, enhance the facility for those who use it recreationally, and contribute to habitat improvements further downstream in the estuary.

A study, carried out last winter, looked at the options available for making improvements to the popular lake in Riverside Park in Ashington, where the community go for water sports and to enjoy nature.

The build-up of silt on the lake bed is adversely affecting the future of these activities as well as impacting on local habitats and water quality.

The study identified that leaving the lock on Wansbeck Barrage, situated at the mouth of the river, open for three months could allow the river to flow through and flush out some of the silt. The Environment Agency and its partners have consulted with river users about the plans and the gates, which are operated by Northumberland County Council, will be opened between mid-November until mid-February. The results will then be reviewed to inform the future operation of the barrage.

It means sports activity on the water will be limited to appropriate tide levels during this time.

Safeguarding the long-term future of the lake

The project is being delivered collaboratively by the Environment Agency, Groundwork North East & Cumbria, Hull University, river user groups, Northumberland County Council, Choppington Parish Council and Ashington Town Council.

Heather Harrison, from the Environment Agency's Environment Programme Team in the North East, said:

We are working closely with the local community, river users and our partners to safeguard the long-term future of Wansbeck Lake and its surroundings.

Our 2020/21 study helped us get a better understanding of the options available to improve the water quality and biodiversity of the lake and its sustainability as a recreation ground for local people to enjoy.

One of the initial options is to try to flush away sediment build

up on the bottom of the lake, and the best way to do this is to leave the gates open for three months to see if it has a positive impact.

This is a popular area for the community and visitors alike and we've worked closely with them throughout to ensure they understand the project, the decisions we are making as a partnership, and continue to have a say in its future.

Popular lake

Councillor John Riddle, County Councillor Cabinet Member for Local Services, added:

This is a well-loved lake popular with families and water sports enthusiasts and we want to do all we can to keep it in good condition.

This work will unfortunately mean use of the lake will be restricted for a period of time although the rest of the park will still be open. Hopefully once this is done we'll end up with an improved facility as well as an improved habitat for the wildlife which flourishes in the area.

The £50,000 trial, funded by the Environment Agency, follows last winter's £35,000 study, which included surveys by marine experts and drone surveys, which collected the data used to inform options for removing the silt build-up.

Other funding for the overall project comes from contributions from National Lottery Heritage Fund, Groundwork NE and Cumbria, Northumberland County Council and Arup engineering.

Wansbeck barrage, which was constructed in 1975, was part of a major regeneration scheme following dismantling of heavy industry in the area. The barrage created a locked navigable inland waterway and artificial 4km long lake, and 3 miles of riverside country park in Ashington.