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WEST END WOMEN AND GIRLS GETTING BACK TO THE LAND THANKS TO CITY CHARITY'S FARM PROJECT

Hundreds of women and girls from Newcastle's west end are reconnecting with their farming heritage thanks to the work of a longstanding city charity.

As part of the wide range of projects that it undertakes, West End Women and Girls Centre acquired a long-term lease on a National Trust smallholding near Scots Gap in rural Northumberland which includes a farmhouse, a barn, a number of outbuildings, a 30 metre polytunnel and two large fields.

Since then, the Elswick-based charity has taken groups of women from their local community up to the site twice a week to plant and grow their own crops, share their skills and look after the animals that live on the farm. Groups of girls aged from five to 19 years old also visit during their school holidays for day trips and residential visits.

A £3,000 grant from the Newcastle Building Society Community Fund at the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland is now helping to cover the charity's increasing transport costs, as well as assisting with the expansion of the farm's growing area.

The project was set up to give the charity's members the chance to reconnect with the land in ways that they can't do within their local urban area and to use the farming skills and experience that they gained in their different homelands.

The women and girls are able to take home the vegetables that they grow to use in their own kitchens, with any excess produce being distributed for free via a pop-up "free farmer's market" outside the charity's Elswick building.

Set up more than 40 years ago, West End Women and Girls Centre is the first and only open access, community-based women and girls centre in Newcastle, and

seeks to drive positive change in the world, in its community and in women and girls' lives.

It has more than 10,000 women and girls accessing its services every year, which include cookery and cycling groups, advice sessions, ESOL classes and a domestic abuse recovery programme with a free creche.

It also runs an established community garden in Elswick Park as part of its Edible Elswick project.

Jill Heslop, farm development manager at West End Women and Girls Centre, says: "We're part of one of the North East's most diverse communities, with women and girls coming from every different background imaginable, and we work to make every single person feel welcome and wanted here.

"Our members tell us just how important it is for them to be able to connect with outdoor green spaces, especially the many women and girls who have small scale farming in their background and heritage, and taking on the farm was our way of enabling them to do so.

"We've had women and girls aged from just five up to 83 years old visiting the farm, with everyone doing what they can to help out, and we often have several generations of the same families working side by side.

"While we've been able to grow and distribute huge amounts of produce, and are planning to do even more next year, the farm is about much more than that.

"It's a peaceful, joyful place where women and girls can spend time sharing knowledge and learning from each other, connecting with nature and enhancing their physical and mental well-being.

"There are obviously a lot of costs to cover in running this type of project and we're so thankful to Newcastle Building Society for helping us to cover our transport costs at a time when we're looking to give as many people as possible access to this fantastic facility."

The Newcastle Building Society Community Fund at the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland offers grants to charities and community groups located in or around the communities served by the Society's branch network.

Kate Myers, community assistant at Newcastle Building Society, adds: “West End Women and Girls Centre has been at the heart of so much amazing and impactful work in our home city for more than four decades.

“The farm is providing so many wonderful new opportunities for hundreds of women and girls, and we’re very glad to helping the charity maximise the numbers of people that they can take out into the countryside.”

Since its launch in 2016, Newcastle Building Society’s Community Fund at the Community Foundation has also contributed over £2.3m in grants and partnerships to a wide variety of charities and projects across the region, including the Sir Bobby Robson Foundation and the Prince’s Trust.

The grants are so far estimated to have had a positive impact on more than 151,000 people.

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About Newcastle Building Society

Newcastle Building Society* is the biggest building society in the North East, with a network of 31 branches and assets of more than £5.3bn. We’ve been here for our members for over 160 years.

As a leading local employer, we’re committed to growing our region’s talent and being a great place to work where people can realise their potential. We hold Platinum IIP and won the Excellence and Positive Impact Award at the 2022 CIPD North East of England HR&D Awards. We were named Company of the Year in the Northumberland and Tyneside category of the North East Business Awards 2022.

We help people to own their home, to save and to plan their finances through our range of products and services. We believe in the role of the high street at the heart of our communities and are proactive in making financial information and financial advice accessible across our region.

Our Financial Advice is provided through our Newcastle Financial Advisers Limited division**.

We're dedicated to helping our North East communities make positive changes; since 2016 the financial support through grants and donations from the Newcastle Building Society Community Fund at the Community Foundation to benefit local causes has surpassed £2.3m

*Newcastle Building Society Principal Office: 1 Cobalt Park Way, Cobalt Business Park, NE28 9EJ. Newcastle Building Society is authorised by the Prudential Regulation Authority and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. Newcastle Building Society is entered in the Financial Services Register under number 156058. You can check this on the Financial Services Register or by contacting the Financial Conduct Authority on 0800 111 6768. Call 0845 734 4345 or visit us online at <https://www.newcastle.co.uk/>

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