

Environment Committee Meeting	
Meeting Date	7 September 2023
Report Title	Review of Biodiversity actions and policies
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Head of Service	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
Lead Officer	Martyn Cassell, Head of Environment and Leisure
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. To comment on the current biodiversity programmes and guide future direction.

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report identifies the key policy documents relevant to biodiversity and the ecological part of the Climate emergency.
- 1.2 It details a number of projects that have been or are being undertaken both by the Council or with the Council supporting other partners.

2 Background

- 2.1 There is a wide range of open space across the Borough, much of which is owned by the Council. Appendix I shows the breakdown of open space categories and includes spaces such as formal parks, allotments, churchyards, woodlands, country and coastal parks. We are also responsible for the management of large parts of the coastline under lease from Crown Estates.
- 2.2 In a Borough of such rich rural open space, the Council has an important role in safeguarding and enhancing our natural environment even where we do not own the land, particularly through our policies in the Local Plan and our Open Space and Play Strategy.
- 2.3 Clearly other strategic partners are important too. Agencies and organisations such as Natural England, Kent County Council, Kent Downs ANOB, RSPB, Kent Wildlife Trust, the Environment Agency and local community groups form the Swale Green Grid with a particular focus on the ecological part of the climate emergency.
- 2.4 The Green Grid developed two key documents that are relevant to this discussion and can be found at the links below;
 - The Green Grid Strategy [Strategies and policies - Green Grid Strategy \(swale.gov.uk\)](https://www.swale.gov.uk/strategies-and-policies-green-grid-strategy)

- The Biodiversity Action Plan [Strategies and policies - Biodiversity Action Plan \(swale.gov.uk\)](https://www.swale.gov.uk)
- 2.5 The majority of our open spaces are maintained under the Council's grounds maintenance contract. The approach to this contract is set out in the Open Spaces and Play Strategy and other key documents such as the Tree Maintenance Policy. Certain specific sites operate under a clear management plan such as at Milton Creek country park, Oare Gunpowder works, Perry Wood, Meads Community Woodland and Rosehill Woods. Within these plans, biodiversity management & improvements are actively encouraged and we are well supported by the community at these sites. Our successes in these areas have led to the achievement of two Green Flag awards.
- 2.6 The Council's 2019 Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) declaration identified biodiversity as a key component to help us achieve our targets. Appendix II shows the specific section of the CEE action plan. Good progress has been made against these actions. Most importantly tree planting has been undertaken which not only helps to offset our annual carbon footprint but supports the biodiversity aims as well. Over 14,000 trees have been planted in the last three years and funding has been achieved to undertake a further 15,500 over the next two planting seasons up to March 2025.
- 2.7 Other projects of note include;
- Achievement of biodiversity gains through the planning system – notably Stones Farm and Iwade.
 - Rewilding projects – Faversham Recreation Ground, work at our coastal parks, Scrapsgate Field and The Glen on 'rough cuts' and wildflower seeding.
 - We are also supporting some locally based projects such as Kent Wildlife Trust's 3Cs project to look at 'Climate Resilient Coasts' and an exploratory project with Peel Ports over use of dredging material.
 - Working with KCC, KWT and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust on Bee Roads to enhance pollinator areas/routes such as along Marine parade next to the Shingle bank Minster on Sea.
 - Working with KCC highways on sustainable drainage schemes (SuDs) to include biodiversity enhancements such as the scheme delivered at Glovers Crescent, Sittingbourne and the underway works at Snipeshill.
 - A continued reduction in the use of pesticides on our grounds maintenance contract
 - Initial pilots of longer grass in urban areas such as Milton recreation ground and King George's playing fields. Officers are also working up a list of potential further trial sites.
- 2.8 The Council work with the University of Kent each year to provide 'employability placements' over the summer period. This year we welcomed a student who undertook a review of research around the benefits of increasing the length of grass in urban open spaces. The report details the impacts of intense

management and the benefits of longer grass in both biodiversity and carbon sequestration. It makes some recommendations/statements that may influence future decisions on grass mowing;

- Grass should not simply be left to grow and some additional element of management is needed to maintain richness and protect from scrub growth,
- Cuttings need to be removed to maximise biodiversity,
- Some periods of the year are better for mowing to protect biodiversity and enhance carbon sequestration than others,
- A large challenge is the ability to quantify and monitor the impacts of management changes, especially for short-term results,
- Longer grass will promote biodiversity and carbon gains but may not make savings due to the more intense management required and costs of disposing of the cut vegetation. For example, the costs per square metre of a biodiversity cut in the current contract are over double the costs of general amenity cuts.
- Despite many studies imploring local authorities to reduce grass cutting for biodiversity, local authorities are often met with complaints from residents about unkempt grass.
- Therefore, in order to get full public support, changes in policies must be accompanied with education and outreach campaigns to challenge the preference low-cut lawns.

2.9 The biodiversity topic is a fast moving agenda nationally. The subject matter is covered by a range of policies, strategies and plans across different departments of the Council and in partnership with other organisations through the Green Grid. Members are asked to discuss the options of how to best capture future activity and direction of the Council. This could one overarching policy or strategy that the others feed into or the continuation biodiversity elements across a range of documents.

3 Proposals

3.1 To comment on the current biodiversity programmes and guide future direction.

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

4.1 Do nothing – there is a range of work on-going that is relevant to the older biodiversity action plan and Climate and Ecological emergency action plan, and it could be decided not to review or revisit the plans.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

5.1 The greenspaces team have made use of the University of Kent to canvas opinions as detailed above but we also liaise regularly with other local authorities to see what they are doing.

- 5.2 The Green Grid is the perfect forum to discuss strategic and operational options and the benefits of this approach are shown above following our inclusion/selection in projects.
- 5.3 Any review of policies in our actions/maintenance would require some form of public consultation.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The emerging corporate plan themes will be one consideration in the review work undertaken by officers, but the existing corporate plan supports this work under its 'Investing in our environment and responding positively to global challenges' priority.
Financial, Resource and Property	<p>There are no direct financial implications of the decisions in this report, however any changes to existing policy in grounds maintenance could have increased costs.</p> <p>The Environment and Leisure team are currently working on a range of projects that mean resource for a complete re-write of all relevant policies is not possible in the short term, but key elements could be factored into the current review of the Open Spaces and Play Strategy that the committee debated last year.</p>
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	<p>The Environment Act 2021 has recently brought in new obligations for local authorities in relation to biodiversity. We are working with partners to see how this impacts the Council's operations.</p> <p>Planning policy legislation and guidance requires our planning team to make decisions that promote biodiversity net gains and to mitigate for any impacts on wildlife through the development process.</p> <p>Changes to maintenance regimes would need to be undertaken through the formal contract variation processes. The current GM contract runs to January 2027.</p>
Crime and Disorder	There are no major implications to this. Some residents may not agree with 'wilder' open spaces due to concerns over litter.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	The whole report is a consideration of our ability to positively impact the climate and ecological emergency and to protect habitats.
Health and Wellbeing	Biodiverse environments with carbon sequestration maximised will improve the health of local residents. Regular access to high quality open space is known to contribute to improved mental health.

	Letting the grass grow longer can have a detrimental impact on those members of the community that suffer with asthma/allergies.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None applicable.
Risk Management and Health and Safety	None applicable.
Equality and Diversity	All members of the community of Swale have a right to expect access to open space.
Privacy and Data Protection	None applicable.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Open space categories for Swale
- Appendix II: Ecology and Biodiversity Section of Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan

8 Background Papers

None.