



Biodiversity Strategy

Document Control

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Consultation	MT, Cabinet, Council
Version	3 published July 2025
Review	E.g. Every 5 years

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Introduction

Biodiversity is just part of the conversation around green and blue infrastructure. There is no denying there is much that can be done to harness the best outcomes, but this strategy is a starting point in scoping what is important to the council, our Borough and our Community; and what we plan to do to deliver against those priorities and objectives

The mechanisms available to the council to deliver against these priorities and objectives are as:

- Planning Authority
- Landowner
- Partner
- Community Leader

As a result of our work and through this strategy, we will:

- Safeguard Biodiversity – through planning policy, providing guidance to developers on our priorities when considering offsetting biodiversity net gain (BNG); and ensure robust monitoring and enforcement of conditions
- Enhancing Biodiversity & Benefits – as landowner, we will effectively and proactively manage our land, develop green spaces that protect and enhance natural habitats as well as support positive health and wellbeing; create landscapes that support offsetting BNG units; develop green corridors and opportunities for rewilding
- Support Partnerships & opportunities – working proactively in partnership, and developing positive relationships, that help us achieve more, such as through the North Kent Woods and Downs National Nature Reserve, Natural England, The Wildlife Trust and local ecologists
- Educate about delivery initiatives – as Community Leader we will work to support our community through the delivery of events and activities that raise awareness around the significance and benefit of open spaces and biodiversity; and the value of initiatives such as through our street champions who support activities such as litter picks.

The work of this strategy supports additional layers of work across the council, including Health, Wellbeing & Equalities; Climate Change; Sport & Leisure and Community Involvement, and as such consideration of those areas will feed into the work of this strategy.

Biodiversity across Gravesham

Biodiversity refers to all living things such as plants, insects and animals, and the ecosystems within which they exist within. Activities such as changing land use, deforestation, pollution including increasing waste and omissions, affect this ecosystem, natural habitats and the species within them.

Gravesham has a wide variety of natural resources supporting a diverse range of habitats and species from internationally designated marshes along the Thames in the north, to ancient and mixed woodlands and chalk grasslands in the central and southern areas of the Borough. The Borough is home to many protected habitats and landscape such as the Thames Estuary and Marshes Ramsar and Special Protection Area (SPA), the North Downs Woodlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC), the Kent Downs National Landscape, as

well as six designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and seventeen Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).

Across Gravesham a number of projects are being delivered which aim to conserve and enhance the Borough's biodiversity. The most significant is the partnership work of the newly declared National Nature Reserve (NNR), the North Kent Woods and Downs NNR, where nature conservation and recovery is its primary focus. The project focuses on the land within the Darnley Estate which embraces Shorne and Ashenbank and Cobham Woods in Gravesham, stretching across Silverhand Estates, Luddesdown and to Ranscombe Farm at Cuxton within Medway, with opportunities to increase connectivity through the landscape going forward.

Alongside this, the Council is exploring opportunities to capitalise on the nature recovery and carbon benefits that offsite BNG can offer through its own land holdings. The Council has purchased land at Hazell's Farm, Durndale Farm and Wingfield Bank Farm near Istead Rise with the aim of developing and managing the land as a receptor site for off-site BNG, alongside other complimentary uses. As well as ensuring that the nature recovery benefits from new development remain in the Borough, this project furthers the Council's corporate objectives to enhance our unique environment, nurture and increase pride of place in open, attractive parks and green spaces and deliver against the wider borough objectives within the Climate Change Strategy.

The introduction of the strengthened biodiversity duty provided the opportunity for the Council to consider what it currently does in respect of biodiversity and nature recovery and consider how it might improve outcomes for biodiversity locally.

This strategy sets out the Council's approach to enhancing the diversity of Gravesham as a place, implementing and delivering policy to achieve positive and meaningful outcomes, and putting People at the heart of initiatives that improve access and supports learning.

Principles and overarching objectives of the Strategy

The principle of this strategy is to ensure that the work of the Council supports the conservation, protection and enhancement of biodiversity.

The Council has a number of overarching objectives that it aims to deliver as part of the work of this strategy. These include:

- Maximising opportunities to develop and enhance biodiversity across the borough the Council will proactively manage its land and assets to optimise their ecological value. In line with statutory duties, the Council is collaborating with Kent County Council to support the delivery of the Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). Following the recent completion of its public consultation phase, the LNRS is now undergoing pre-publication review, with final publication expected later this year.
- To safeguard existing biodiversity, the Council will use its Planning Authority powers to assess, monitor, and enforce development conditions, ensuring no net loss of natural habitats and species.
- To support community action by developing a series of community engagement activities that foster involvement and education

Strategic Objectives

Enhancing Diversity of Place

Gravesham Borough Council recognises the value and contribution that its land ownership can have on the biodiversity within the Borough and is working to develop and enhance opportunities, some of which include:

Developing land for BNG Credits

In 2023 the Council acquired just over 160 acres (65 hectares) of land, made up of 3 plots of land, sited between Gravesend and Istead Rise. The land currently comprises of 1 plot with a tenanted farmer in situ and 2 vacant plots, currently used as an open space by local residents, although predominantly for dog walking and similar activities as there are no facilities on the site. Following an initial land assessment officers have been scoping work required to protect and enhance the existing biodiversity within the space and prepare it in order to create Biodiversity Units which could be purchased by local developers to offset their requirements to increase the BNG on all development sites by 10%, as per the biodiversity net gain legislation Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021.

Increasing biodiversity in town centre environments

Whereas town centre spaces once focussed on paving out areas, the Council is taking measures to review the changing look and use of High Streets and introduce more green spaces, such as pocket parks or living walls that not only enhance the environment of people using these spaces but increases the natural habitat within these predominantly built up areas.

Redesigning roadways where space is available to consider introducing tree lined avenues that help to break down the impact of vehicular traffic and omissions, and looking at ways that alternative routes, such as cycle ways can be used to navigate space and traverse the towns whilst supporting the introduction of more green spaces.

Enhancing natural species and habitats in open spaces

Through a range of initiatives including rewilding and replanting the Council is working to improve biodiversity through a range of open spaces. From parks to cemeteries and pockets of open roadside spaces, routines that once centered around regular grass cutting, for example, are now under constant review to ensure opportunities to increase and enhance natural species and habitats are being prioritized.

Council owned or managed buildings

The Council owns a portfolio of properties covering a range of asset classes which are internally managed by the Strategic Property Management team. Cyclical reviews are undertaken by the team of Estate Surveyors to identify opportunities to maximise the efficiency of the buildings through sustainability and monitoring our climate action targets.

Policy

The Council is clear about its responsibilities in relation to Biodiversity Net Gain including the monitoring and analysis of achievements and protection of the national landscape in the light of developments, such as the Lower Thames Crossing, for example, which will have a significant impact on BNG

By delivering against local and national policy, the Council will maintain its role in protecting and enhancing BNG across the Borough. Key policies include:

Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Whilst Kent County Council is responsible for the preparation of the Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Officers from the Council have been involved in the development of the Strategy

Species Conservation Strategies/Protected Site Strategies

Natural England is responsible for developing these strategies. This work is yet to commence, but the Council will engage with their development and delivery as appropriate

Corporate Plan

A key priority of the Corporate Plan is to deliver a safe, clean and attractive environment, enhanced by a sustainable and increasingly energised local economy' and includes commitments to create a borough which protects the environment and provides beautiful spaces for our residents and visitors to enjoy.

Climate Change Strategy and Action Delivery Plan

The Council declared a Climate emergency in June 2019 and subsequently published a Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan in December 2021. The Climate Change Strategy sets out the Council's approach to tackling its own emissions as well as supporting communities to reduce their own carbon footprint. The accompanying Action Delivery Plan includes a range of actions relating to the conservation and protection of biodiversity that the Council propose to develop and deliver.

Procurement Strategy

The Council's Procurement Strategy commits to working with services communities, external partners, and supply markets to show leadership, improve standards, and enable investments which support environmental sustainability priorities and plays our part in tackling the global climate emergency.

Adopted Gravesham Local Plan

The Local plan supports the protection and enhancement of biodiversity through a number of its policies including Sustainable Development, Green Infrastructure, Sport and Recreation, Development and Design Principles.

Emerging Local Plan and Site Allocations

The emerging Local Plan will provide updated policies which support the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, by embedding BNG requirements, embracing the Green Infrastructure principles set out in Design for Gravesham, alongside the recommendations set out in the Green and Blue Infrastructure Study (2021) prepared to inform the emerging Local Plan.

Preparation and implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain for the purposes of Development Management

In line with the statutory framework, major and some minor developments are required to deliver a minimum of 10 % BNG to ensure that development has a positive impact on the natural environment by creating new habitats and green spaces

Design for Gravesham - Design Code

The Council has adopted a Design Code which seeks to maximise opportunities to conserve and enhance blue and green infrastructure by ensuring new development delivers green

interventions which improves the lives of local residents while connecting into the wider Green infrastructure network.

People – Partnerships, Community & Volunteers

Gravesham values its community and their involvement in activities that enhance where they live, work and play. There are a range of initiatives already taking place and include community planting, enhancing public access, promoting learning and information

The Council is committed to work with external partners and community groups to benefit from the expertise, resources and funding opportunities that these groups can bring to improve outcomes for biodiversity.

Equally, as part of its planning function, the Council is an active member of a number of nature conservation partnerships, as follows:

Local Nature Partnerships

The focus of the partnership is to provide the strategic coordination and leadership needed to restore nature across Kent and Medway, underpinning a thriving economy and healthy population.

The Partnership updated the Kent Biodiversity Strategy (2019 – 2044) which identifies biodiversity opportunity areas with the greatest potential for habitats restoration and enhancement. These are:

- Medway Gap & North Kent Downs
- Old Chalk New Downs
- Thameside Green Corridors
- North Kent Marshes

The Partnership is currently supporting the Making Space for Nature Project that is developing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Kent and Medway, and the Council is actively participating in this. The above opportunity areas will be reviewed as part of this process.

Local Wildlife Trust.

The Council has a Service Level Agreement with the Kent Wildlife Trust who manages Local Wildlife Sites in the Borough and across Kent.

Kent Downs National Landscape

The Kent Downs National Landscape have produced a Management Plan which has been adopted by the Council and is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications within the National Landscape and its setting. The Council is a Member of the Kent Downs Joint Advisory Committee (JAC).

The North Kent Woods and Downs National Nature Reserve

The Council has actively participated, alongside Natural England and a range of nature conservation bodies in a partnership project working towards the declaration of a National Nature Reserve in Gravesham and Medway.

North Kent Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Scheme (SAMMS) Board

The Council is a Board Member on the North Kent Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Scheme (SAMMS) Board, a partnership of local authorities, developers and

environmental organisations. The partnership was set up to address the impact that additional development in North Kent will have on bird populations on the Thames, Medway and Swale Estuaries. These sites are Special protection Areas (SPA's) and Ramsar Sites that are protected by both European and international designations.

Local Volunteering Groups

The Council is proud of the support, commitment and achievements it derives from the local community and, in particular, a cohort of active and passionate volunteers. Such groups include

- Gravesham Street Champions who are a network of residents who volunteer to improve their local environment.
- A new Green/Heritage volunteer group, where volunteers will be trained to undertake specific projects that have a direct impact on improving biodiversity in the Borough.

Gravesham Youth Council

The Council comprises a group of young people aged between 11 and 17 from across the Borough who discuss issues that matter to them, contribute to decision making and support information dissemination to other young people through the school network. Biodiversity and the role of young people in this area is a topic of frequent discussion. The Youth Council will continue to be a mechanism to support awareness and involvement

Community Involvement & Engagement

The Council recently introduced a new model for engagement along with a digital platform to aid reach and involvement. These systems and processes will support information dissemination and engagement across the Borough

The Council will consider developing a programme of community engagement, environmental education and initiatives to build awareness around the biodiversity agenda.

Action Plans and Delivery

Following the delivery of the Biodiversity First Consideration report, the Council must agree policies and objectives and, as soon as possible, act on these and prepare the first formal Biodiversity Report for publication by 1st January 2026, with subsequent reports published every five years thereafter. The Biodiversity Report (rather than the first consideration report) will illustrate how the Council is helping to improve nature recovery and the progress being made towards achieving our objectives in this regard to comply with the biodiversity duty.

This First Consideration Report provided an opportunity for the Council to consider what work it will deliver moving forward. Whilst improving outcomes for biodiversity will be delivered across a number of service areas and existing strategies, for example the Climate Change Strategy, the following are specific actions the Council is committing as part of this strategy:

Deliver a Biodiversity First Report

The report will be delivered by 1 January 2026 providing a summary of the action taken to comply with the Biodiversity Duty, the policies and objectives set out to meet the Duty and the actions that have been completed, whether that is delivered by Gravesham Borough or in partnership.

Schedule for Biodiversity Reports

The biodiversity reports are to be delivered every 5 years, providing an update on achievements and action plans.

Develop appropriate strategies

Strategies that support delivery of this work, but not yet available, such as Tree and Land Management Strategies for Council owned sites

Develop feasibility studies

To assess potential locations for enhancement, analysis of the local and regional marketplace for biodiversity net gain initiatives, integrating biodiversity initiatives with urban development plans,

Broaden awareness

By undertaking further discussion across departments and with key stakeholders to seek views on the work currently being delivered, improve awareness and understanding of biodiversity requirements and look for opportunities to improve outcomes.

Develop a programme of community engagement

Initiatives to build awareness around the agenda and further develop projects and create new opportunities for community involvement and stewardship.

Enhance our evidence base

For this area of work by mapping green spaces in relation to communities, undertaking wildlife & species assessments and utilising external data sources such as Local Nature Recovery Strategy data.

An internal working group will meet on a bi-monthly basis to review workstreams and record actions that directly impact on the delivery of this work, with progress updates reported to the Council's Management Team and through the Committee Structure for oversight and decision-making as appropriate.