

Agenda

Environment Committee Meeting

Date: Thursday, 7 September 2023

Time 7.00 pm

Venue: Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT*

Membership:

Councillors Roger Clark, Mike Henderson, Carole Jackson, Rich Lehmann (Chair), Charlie Miller, Pete Neal, Chris Palmer, Ashley Shiel, Julien Speed, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Angie Valls, Mike Whiting, Chris Williams and Dolley Wooster (Vice-Chair).

Quorum = 5

Pages

Information about this meeting

*Members of the press and public can listen to this meeting live. Details of how to join the meeting will be added to the website by 6 September 2023.

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2. Apologies for Absence

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The Chair will ask Members if they have any disclosable pecuniary interests (DPIs) or disclosable non-pecuniary interests (DNPIs) to declare in respect of items on the agenda. Members with a DPI in an item must leave the room for that item and may not participate in the debate or vote.

Aside from disclosable interests, where a fair-minded and informed observer would think there was a real possibility that a Member might be biased or predetermined on an item, the Member should declare this and leave the room while that item is considered.

Members who are in any doubt about interests, bias or predetermination should contact the monitoring officer for advice prior to the meeting.

4. Minutes

To approve the [Minutes](#) of the meeting held on 29 June 2023 (Minute Nos. 157 – 164) as a correct record.

Part B reports for the Environment Committee to decide

- | | | |
|----|---|---------|
| 5. | Review of Biodiversity actions and policies | 5 - 16 |
| 6. | Forward Decisions Plan | 17 - 18 |

Issued on Wednesday, 30 August 2023

The reports included in Part I of this agenda can be made available in alternative formats. For further information about this service, or to arrange for special facilities to be provided at the meeting, please contact **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES on 01795 417330**. To find out more about the work of the Committee, please visit www.swale.gov.uk

**Chief Executive, Swale Borough Council,
Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT**

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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 \(swale.gov.uk\)](#)

- 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.

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Appendix I – Open Space Categories

	Category	Primary purpose	Number of Sites	Total hectares
Open spaces	Parks and gardens	Accessible, high quality opportunities for informal recreation and community events.	28	191.34
	Natural and semi-natural greenspaces	Wildlife conservation, biodiversity and environmental education and awareness. Includes urban woodland and beaches, where appropriate.	17	590.97
	Amenity greenspace	Opportunities for informal activities close to home or work or enhancement of the appearance of residential or other areas.	88	68.65
	Provision for children and young people	Areas designed primarily for play and social interaction involving children and young people, such as equipped play areas, MUGAs, skateboard areas and teenage shelters.	94	8.44
	Allotments	Opportunities for those people who wish to do so to grow their own produce as part of the long term promotion of sustainability, health and social inclusion.	28	25.82
	Cemeteries, disused churchyards and other burial grounds	Quiet contemplation and burial of the dead, often linked to the promotion of wildlife conservation and biodiversity.	23	24.61

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Appendix II – Section of Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan

Ecology and Biodiversity

Biodiversity net gain is now a requirement within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). New developments will need to demonstrate how this has been achieved.

Existing policies on landscape and biodiversity in the Local Plan are robust, nevertheless these will be reviewed in light of updated policy, guidance and best practice. A recent review of AONBs suggests they are well situated to be the focus for nature recovery and climate change mitigation and form the backbone of the Nature Recovery Networks. With part of the North Downs AONB within Swale, we are well placed to advance this agenda with the AONB.

The development of the Kent Nature Partnership (KNP) Biodiversity Strategy 2019-2044 is nearing completion. The aim of the strategy is to deliver the restoration and creation of habitats that are thriving ensuring Kent's terrestrial, freshwater, intertidal and marine environments regain and retain good health. Key themes are terrestrial habitats; marine habitats; freshwater and intertidal ecosystems and connecting people with the natural environment

According to the Government's National Forest Inventory (NFI) 8% of the Swale area is woodland. Trees play an important role in removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it as carbon. They also provide a home for nature, mitigate air pollution and reduce flood risk.

Current activities, actions and programmes

There are many existing networks working on the ecological and biodiversity projects within Swale. These groups, such as the Green Grid Network are highly active and engaged in Kent-wide initiatives.

Objectives

To improve development outcomes which support and improve people and places, access and recreation, connectivity and green spaces and the natural and built environment. Some reports recommend Swale should more than double our tree cover by 2030.¹

¹ <https://takeclimateaction.uk/climate-action/methodology-local-authority-data-project>

Opportunities and benefits

Ecology, biodiversity and green space are vital to both mitigating climate change and to helping us to adapt to the inevitable climate change due to historic carbon emissions. We rely on these assets for our quality of life, and provision of food and water. Protecting and enhancing these assets is vital. Green spaces and planting in urban areas promote good physical and mental health.

Ecology and biodiversity action plan. (High Priority key actions in bold.)

Dept.	Action	Timescale	Annual Carbon Reduction (tCO ₂ e)	Progress	
Actions Swale Borough Council can take:					
1	CEL	Tree planting on council land (target; 148,100 trees or 60 acres of woodland) to offset 20% of council emissions.	2025	1,481t offset (25t to date)	2,500 trees planted in country parks 2019/20
2	Planning	To use planning policy (local plan and a supplementary planning document) to improve development outcomes which support access and recreation, green spaces, biodiversity and climate change adaptation and mitigation.	Short	Medium	Ongoing
3	CEL	Establish a baseline of trees and woodland on council land and develop a funded action plan to increase tree cover in Swale and promote the benefits of sequestration.	Short	Medium	
4	Planning	Ensure the installation and maintenance of landscaping in new developments to contribute to biodiversity net gain via suitable conditions or Section 106 agreements.	Short	Medium	Ongoing
5	CEL	Minimise use of fertilizers, pesticides and weed killers.	Short	Small	

6	CEL	Promote use of locally produced compost derived from garden and food waste collections	Short	Small	
Actions we can take in partnership with others					
7	CEL	Encourage coppicing of council woodland to promote biodiversity and use of local woodland products in Swale's country parks.	Short	Small	
8	CEL/ECS/EH	Engage business and community groups to support tree planting and conservation work in Swale's efforts to achieve action 1	Short	Large	Ongoing
9	CEL	Promote forest and beach schools	Short	Small	
10	CEL	Support Swale in Bloom working with schools, community groups, voluntary groups and Town and Parish Councils to enhance local habitats and wildlife corridors improving biodiversity conditions across Swale	Short	Small	Ongoing

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Environment Committee Forward Decisions Plan

Report title, background information and recommendation(s)	Date of meeting	Open or exempt?	Lead Officer and report author
Climate and Ecological Emergency Annual report 2023 draft	Nov/Dec 2023	Open	Head of Service: Head of Environment and Leisure, Martyn Cassell Lead Officer: Janet Hill
BBQs in public places - review	Nov/Dec 2023	Open	Head of Service: Head of Environment and Leisure, Martyn Cassell Lead Officer: Graeme Tuff
Open Spaces and Play Strategy	January 2024	Open	Head of Service: Head of Environment and Leisure, Martyn Cassell Lead Officer: Jay Jenkins
'Scrapsgate field' horse riding review	March 2024	Open	Head of Service: Head of Environment and Leisure, Martyn Cassell Lead Officer: Graeme Tuff

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