



BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

VISION: “TO HALT THE DECLINE OF BIODIVERSITY,
PROTECT AND RE-CONNECT OUR HABITATS AND
CONSERVE, RESTORE AND ENHANCE SPECIES
POPULATIONS”

Executive Summary

- Our vision is to halt the decline of biodiversity in Southampton, strengthen habitat connections and to improve the condition of our valuable semi-natural habitats. As our statutory Biodiversity Duty, we will ensure developers deliver no less than 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) for all small and large developments taking place across the city; a measurable increase in habitat delivered within Southampton. We will ensure our plans for habitat restoration integrate measures from the Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity within the city. We will help Central Government deliver its targets set out in the 25-year Environment Plan, recovering and enhancing nature and protecting and improving our natural environment.
- Human health depends on a well-functioning natural environment. A healthy environment delivers multiple benefits including supporting a green economy, improving quality of life, protecting biodiversity and enhancing the ability of ecosystems to deliver services (Ecosystem Services) such as improving water and air quality, providing space for recreation/relaxation and climate change adaptation. Environments rich in wildlife improve wellbeing through emotional, social and psychological benefits.
- In England, we have lost over 15% of species since 1970, there has been widespread loss and degradation of habitats across England dating back many centuries, from which, our wildlife has not recovered. 97% of wildflower meadows were lost between the 1930s and 1984. Four UK high temperature records were broken in 2019 and there was a 12% increase in above average rainfall with significant flooding events. There has been a 41% decrease in species' populations since 1970. The majority of people in the UK acknowledge that nature is under threat and needs urgent action to protect and restore it.
- Southampton's biodiversity is rich, diverse and valuable. It includes nationally and internationally important habitats such as coastal shingle, mudflat, chalk rivers, streams, ponds, grassland, wet meadow and ancient woodland.
- Our semi-natural habitats are under threat through both direct loss (generally from development pressure) and degradation in their condition (due to a lack of management, pressure from our increasing population, and pollution).
- This strategy sets out the key priorities relating to habitats and wildlife within Southampton, identifies the main issues and challenges and outlines how we will tackle those issues. Detail on how this strategy will be implemented will be provided in an accompanying Delivery Plan.
- As a Council, we have a legal duty to consider biodiversity across all of our functions to help halt the loss of biodiversity, seek opportunities to reverse the decline of habitat loss, and enhance species diversity and species abundance.

Our Approach

- The timeframe for the Biodiversity Strategy covers the period from 2024 to 2029, after which time, it will be reviewed.
- The council will improve its knowledge of Southampton's biodiversity and the reasons for its degradation and loss. We will undertake systematic surveys of our habitats and species. The results of surveys will help identify key habitats and species and inform how we manage our land.
- We will update our Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), providing a record of our ecological baseline, identifying key species and habitats, setting clear goals of what we want to achieve, our timeframes and how we will go about restoration and enhancement.
- We will increase knowledge and understanding of species requirements and wildlife legislation with increased levels of training for our staff.
- We will continue to develop our understanding and appreciation of the crucial benefits (ecosystem services) that are delivered by a healthy city ecosystem (such as climate control and flood alleviation) and ensure the benefits we receive from healthy ecosystems are understood by all our key staff and decision makers.
- We will ensure that our Local Plan Framework, guiding development in the city, sets out policies for the conservation of important international, national and local wildlife sites, habitats of biodiversity importance and species. The statutory requirement for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) will be included in our Biodiversity policy. We will set high standards for all future development, ensuring that the right habitat/green infrastructure is delivered in the right location. To support our Biodiversity policy, Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) will provide further information in relation to nutrient neutrality, mitigation for recreational disturbance, and, where and what type of BNG will be required within Southampton.
- Wildlife needs a network of linked habitats. We will retain existing habitat links, strengthen those which have become fragmented and create new ones. Links will be strengthened, both within the city and into adjoining districts, creating a robust Green Grid.
- Collaborative working. Council departments will work together, ensuring our Biodiversity Duty and approach to land management protects, enhances and connects habitats across the city. We will work with others on joint biodiversity related initiatives including Hampshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and Southampton National Park City. We will work with people studying, working and living in the city, helping forge relationships across communities to encourage people to access, explore and make improvements to their local green spaces. Increasing opportunities for outdoor physical activity and improving physical and mental health whilst, at the same time, benefiting wildlife. Collaborative working on various city-wide projects will be key to making connections between parks, open spaces, the Greenways and other important sites and habitats. Our new Rangers, working with the wider Natural Environment Team and Maintenance Operations teams, will ensure the city's habitats are appropriately managed. We will make improvements in all our semi-natural spaces for wildlife and for people. We will work closely with residents, helping to engage and empower communities to act for nature in order to help Southampton become a greener, healthier, city for wildlife and people. Our Community Campaigns Officer will continue to work with volunteers on habitat restoration projects.

Focus

We are developing a Green Grid to help us recognise and safeguard existing green infrastructure and identify how to maximise benefits through introducing more. The Green Grid will set out key green connections in the city, both existing (such as our Greenways) but also aspirational links which we have identified as being crucial for ensuring a better connected, greener and healthier city for people and wildlife. Our Green Infrastructure Strategy will provide information on the importance of green infrastructure and how the Green Grid will be implemented. Green Grid policy will be included in our Local Plan Review, helping to guide well-designed development and setting high standards for green infrastructure to be delivered. This policy will be supported by a Green Grid Map/s showing current and proposed connections. Our Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan will identify projects, on the ground, that will be delivered to help create and strengthen connections across the city.

The Biodiversity Strategy provides a statement on how Southampton City Council will protect, enhance, connect and create areas of nature conservation value within Southampton and help species recovery. We will manage land and structures within our portfolio to protect and enhance habitats and species in line with our statutory duties. We will secure dedicated resources within the council to deliver improvements in semi-natural habitat in the city.

As well as engaging with external stakeholders, we will engage with our own staff to ensure that we are working collaboratively and delivering benefits for wildlife whilst undertaking our statutory duties. We will ensure all the work we undertake as a council (management of our land, housing, schools and other built structures) aligns with wildlife legislation and best practice guidance, making sure we protect habitats and species whilst going about our day-to-day activities.

Our Local Plan Review will include clear policies that ensure development in the city is well-designed, delivers no less than 10% BNG and aligns with the aims of Hampshire's LNRS.

We will work with all sectors of the city, including engaging with as many residents as possible, to design and deliver plans to create green links. Together we will green the grey, tree line our streets, incorporate sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and help inspire others to support wildlife.

Key Priorities

We have identified five key priorities:

- Priority 1: Protect, Enhance and Connect our Ecological Network
 - Increase the area of habitat located between core sites in the ecological network to act as stepping-stones for species moving between core sites
- Priority 2: Engage in a Programme of Habitat Management Work to Achieve an Overall Improvement in Habitat Condition
 - A programme of habitat management and monitoring work will lead to an improvement in the condition of habitats on the city's semi-natural greenspaces.
- Priority 3: Increase Species Diversity and Improve Species Populations
 - Identify species which are declining and/or at risk and put in place a programme of conservation management to support wildlife and increase diversity and populations.
- Priority 4: Identify and Deliver Opportunities for the Creation and Enhancement of Habitats
 - Update our knowledge of biodiversity in the city. Ensure council land is managed to benefit biodiversity, wherever possible. Retain extent and improve quality (where needed) of statutory and non-statutory designated land of nature conservation. Help increase the quality, diversity and extent of habitats on land outside of council ownership.
- Priority 5: Priority/ outcomes 5. Increase Resilience of Biodiversity to Safeguard Ecosystem Service Delivery
 - Habitats in better condition which are more resilient to climate change and support increased species population levels.

Setting the Scene

- Southampton's geographical location, relatively warm climate, underlying geology and position between two rivers (the Test and Itchen) has resulted in a city with a diverse range of habitats and species.
- The city supports a wide variety of notable habitats including coast, mudflats, rivers, ponds, wet meadows, heathland, grassland and woodland. Some of these habitats are of significant importance and protected under national and international legislation including Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites. The city also supports 66 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).
- The city has a relatively large extent of non-designated habitat, with 49 parks and 1,140 hectares of green open space, including the Common which has over 17 million visitors each year. In total, 20% of the city is classified as publicly accessible green space.
- Southampton neighbours the New Forest National Park, Southampton Water, the Solent and the range of protected habitats within them.
- The Southampton BAP, which updated the 1992 Nature Conservation Strategy, is now over 16 years old. Since publication of the BAP, there have been significant changes to legislation (the Environment Act, 2021), policy and guidance. The 2021 Environment Act is very ambitious. Its implementation will halt the decline of nature by 2030 and requires all new development to deliver a minimum of 10% BNG. The duty of delivering BNG is the responsibility of Local Planning Authorities. As part of the Act, Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be created to help build a Nature Recovery Network across England; Hampshire County Council are currently developing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Hampshire, which includes Southampton.
- Southampton City Council realises the importance and urgency of halting the global decline in species. The council is committed to improving and increasing the greenspace across the city, playing its part in halting the loss of biodiversity at a local level. We realise the importance of acting without delay; stopping the decline and fragmentation of biodiversity in the city needs to be addressed urgently. Making important changes to the way we deal with our natural environment now will lead to lasting physical and mental health benefits for the city's population and make the city a more attractive place to work, live and visit. To improve our residents' wellbeing and ensure that wildlife and habitats can persist for future generations, we want to make the city as green as possible. The council cannot protect and enhance biodiversity on its own; we will need the help of residents, businesses, and visitors.
- We acknowledge there is a balance between the inevitable future growth within the city and the associated pressures that brings, in particular, to designated sites in Southampton and the surrounding area such as the New Forest National Park.
- The key drivers of biodiversity loss in Southampton include climate change, development, pollution (both on the land and in our watercourses), population related impacts (such as habitat degradation/erosion/disturbance/recreation), 'Permitted Development' changes (such as car parking resulting in additional hardstanding), and inappropriate and/or lack of management of habitats. Small-scale, incremental encroachment on small incidental spaces and private gardens is eroding the city's green network for both people and wildlife. Fragmentation of the green network is affecting the benefits (ecosystem services) that a healthy, well-connected ecosystem can deliver.

What Do Our Residents Say?

In March 2022, we ran a consultation about a Southampton Green Grid. We asked people what they thought about the city's greenspaces, and these are some of the most commonly raised responses:

- There is widespread affection and appreciation of the green spaces in Southampton, and a sense of pride, but people feel that the quality of these spaces has declined in recent years. The Greenways in particular were mentioned as amazing places for wildlife but that better management of these sites is imperative.
- Concern about the environment and climate change have been cited as the most important challenges faced by the city. People expressed concern that further development will be detrimental to the extent and quality of our green spaces (City Vision 2020).
- 98% of responses stated people would like more nature and wildlife in the city.
- 84% of respondents said they enhance their outside spaces for wildlife, reducing mowing to encourage pollinators, planting pollinator-friendly species, constructing ponds and enhancing gardens for wildlife such as birds and hedgehogs.
- 89% of respondents feel that using native species (local and natural) for planting is important for encouraging wildlife and improving habitats and that plants and trees used in landscaping should be chosen to be of benefit to wildlife.
- 91% of respondents said that street tree planting improves the character of an area.
- Nearly half of respondents mentioned The Common as being their favourite green space in the city due to its close proximity to where they live and being able to walk there. Riverside Park was cited as the next most visited green space.
- 91% of respondents said they would like to see more green spaces in the city. The remaining 9% said they would like to see the existing green spaces better maintained and improved.
- Asked about what would encourage people to make more use of their green space, the majority of people cited more wildlife, peace and tranquillity, biodiversity and facilities such as toilets/cafés. People also asked for better signage, transport connections and generally better access.
- St James Park received an overwhelming number of positive comments (85% of respondents said they felt positive about this park). On the contrary, Mayflower Park was the park mostly frequently highlighted as being in need of significant improvements.

Priority/Outcomes 1. Protect, Enhance and Connect our Ecological Network

Outcome/focus	What do we want to achieve?	How will we achieve this?
Increased protection of existing habitats.	Ensure that all existing habitat is safeguarded and being managed appropriately.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure policy framework is strong enough to safeguard areas of habitat from inappropriate uses. ▪ Change management regimes to improve habitat condition (ie. reduce mowing frequency). ▪ Create areas of buffering habitat to protect principal biodiversity features. ▪ Only use pesticide in situations where all other alternatives have been considered ineffective.
Increased habitat connectivity, a city-wide Green Grid.	Increase the extent of habitat located between core sites in the ecological network to act as stepping-stones for species moving between core sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement our GI Strategy, create ward-level Green Grid maps with clear targets, actions, delivery partners and funding opportunities. ▪ Create areas of new habitat to link up existing isolated areas. ▪ Use the planning system to deliver new habitat within developments. ▪ Ensure landscape planting includes species of recognised value to wildlife. ▪ Education campaigns around ‘wildlife friendly’ gardening and landscaping ▪ Create ‘stepping-stones’ for wildlife – through introduction of new green/blue infrastructure. ▪ Plant appropriate trees along streets and ensure ongoing management. ▪ Deliver SuDS features that support biodiversity.

Priority/Outcomes 2. Achieve an Overall Improvement in Habitat Condition

Outcome/focus	What do we want to achieve?	How will we achieve this?
Improved habitat condition.	<p>Understand the existing condition of our habitats and the reasons for their decline in extent and condition. Retain and increase the extent of land protected by statutory and non-statutory nature conservation designations, bringing all sites into favourable condition. A programme of habitat management and monitoring work will lead to a measurable improvement in the condition of habitats within the city's semi-natural green and blue spaces, whilst also ensuring that our open spaces are safe places for the public to enjoy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Habitat management plans, with clear targets/action/management will be prepared for each semi-natural area, including all of our designated sites; these plans will be implemented by our Ranger team. ▪ Annual work programmes will be developed and implemented by our Ranger team, informed by up-to-date baseline habitat and species data. ▪ Additional resources, including volunteers and Community Payback, will be involved in practical habitat management work. ▪ A monitoring programme for habitats and species will be put in place so we can identify and report on the improvements being made. ▪ Engage with landowners to improve habitats outside of the council's land ownership.

Priority/Outcomes 3. Increase Species Diversity and Improve Species Populations

Outcome/focus	What do we want to achieve?	How will we achieve this?
<p>Improve species diversity and species populations.</p>	<p>Identify species which are declining and/or at risk and put in place a programme of conservation management and initiatives to conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In our new BAP, we will set clear goals, identifying target species and their habitat requirements within the city. ▪ Develop and implement conservation management plans for target species, where these are needed. ▪ Review land management practices across the council to ensure our approaches are consistent and in line with good conservation practices. ▪ Establish a programme of habitat mapping and species monitoring. ▪ Develop a system of accurate and consistent recording and storage of species and habitat data. ▪ Continue to increase wildlife awareness and good practice for those staff involved in land and building management across the council.

Priority/Outcomes 4. Identify and Deliver Opportunities for the Creation and Enhancement of Habitats

Outcome/focus	What do we want to achieve?	How will we achieve this?
Create and enhance habitats.	Update our knowledge of biodiversity in the city. Ensure all our land is managed to protect and enhance biodiversity. Help increase the quality, diversity and extent of habitats outside of our land ownership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Detail will be provided in our local updated BAP. ▪ Identify suitable sites and projects for BNG funding. ▪ Prepare sites within the city for habitat banking to deliver off-site BNG units. ▪ Work with others across the council to deliver habitat enhancements on our land, wherever possible. ▪ Work with other landowners /stakeholders to develop and deliver habitat enhancements. ▪ Run biodiversity initiatives to encourage residents, businesses, and community organisations to create opportunities for wildlife on land outside of council ownership, such as gardens and grounds. ▪ Deliver new habitats, in a spatially strategic way via the planning system. ▪ Ensure planning advice consistently aims to protect and enhance of biodiversity in both new and redevelopment applications, delivering clear and measurable gains for biodiversity.

Priority/Outcomes 5. Increase Resilience of Biodiversity to Safeguard Ecosystem Service Delivery

Outcome/focus	What do we want to achieve?	How will we achieve this?
More robust biodiversity.	Healthier and better connected green and blue habitats which are more resilient to climate change and human pressure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure we have sufficient protective buffers around our more sensitive sites to reduce disturbance to wildlife and habitats. ▪ Ensure no further loss of habitat. ▪ Raise awareness of how everyone in the city can help improve space for wildlife. ▪ Plant the right species. Use climate adaptable planting and planting species of value to local wildlife (with appropriate long-term management in place).

Delivering our strategy

- Southampton's wildlife can only effectively be protected and enhanced with the support of the council, the community and other landowners in the city all acting in partnership. Fortunately, there is already a very high level of public support and interest. Encouraging and supporting communities to enhance their local green spaces for the benefit of wildlife also has the potential to deliver benefits across other council priorities and strategies, such as improving health and wellbeing. The council will continue to encourage and will increase its support in helping people and communities to improve their local green space for nature.
- The council will update its BAP; the BAP will act, in part, as an implementation plan for this strategy. It will have clear targets and detail on how those targets will be achieved, including a set of annual actions and a monitoring regime. We will work with local nature organisations in its development to ensure the BAP is concise, ambitious and deliverable.
- The delivery of this Strategy will require the council to manage its land for the benefit of biodiversity, wherever possible. We will alter grassland mowing (grounds maintenance) regimes to ensure this habitat is managed to benefit wildlife. Our Ranger Team will work closely with our Grounds Maintenance Teams and Ecologist to identify further habitat that can be managed for wildlife. We will work closely with all our teams across the whole of the council to ensure we seize the opportunity to improve biodiversity within all our sectors of work (including highways, rail, landscape, schools and housing), providing clear advice in the form of advice/guidance notes to ensure a consistent, joined up approach. All habitat creation activities will take account of any potential conflicts of interest within the council (ie. tree planting must take account of potential impacts relating to air quality/sightlines/underground services/archaeology etc) and the need for ongoing management.
- The aims and objectives of the Local Plan, Greenspace Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, Green Infrastructure Strategy, Climate Change Strategy and Tree Strategy (to be developed) will all align. This will ensure that our efforts are consistent, joined up and delivered in the right way and in the right locations.
- We will continue with our rolling programme of species-specific and habitat surveys to record and monitor the ecological baseline of the city; the data from these surveys will inform habitat management plans for our semi-natural sites (such as the Greenways and waterbodies). Our Rangers will implement these habitat management plans, over time, improving the condition of all our semi-natural habitat.
- Planning policies and Development Management will deliver some of the priorities within this strategy. Green Grid Policy, Biodiversity Policy and Supplementary Planning Documents to support our Local Plan will ensure appropriate BNG (no less than 10%) is delivered in the right parts of the city. Planning Policy will ensure that future development includes high quality green infrastructure, delivered in the right areas of the city to improve and strengthen our green network, such as green roofs/green facades and "stepping stone" habitats for wildlife. The Green Space Factor tool will be used to assess impacts of development.
- The council will continue to work with statutory agencies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency, together with partners such as the Forestry Commission, neighbouring Local Authorities, academic institutions and the commercial sector.
- We will support organisations who are working with and supporting communities to improve green spaces, habitat and species diversity such as Parks Friends groups, SO18 Big Local, Green Volunteer Network and Southampton National Park City. We will support the efforts of local and national nature conservation groups such as Southampton Natural History Society, Hampshire and Isle of

Wight Wildlife Trust, Hampshire Bat Group, Hampshire Ornithological Society, Hampshire Swift Society, and People's Trust for Endangered Species.

- Biodiversity will be considered in every relevant section of the council, ensuring as we undertake tasks as part of our regulatory and statutory functions, we have regard for the aims of this Strategy to provide a fully joined up approach.
- All our day-to-day activities (including work carried out by staff within our supply chain, such as contractors) will be compliant with relevant environmental and wildlife legislation and best practice guidance. Internal wildlife awareness training will continue to be delivered to all relevant staff across the various council departments who are involved in building and land management.
- We will reduce our use of pesticides, ensuring we only use pesticides in situations where all other alternatives have been considered ineffective. Where possible, using non-chemical, manual or mechanical means of managing invasive plants.
- Further information on how the Council will implement this strategy will be provided within the Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan (to be developed during 2024). The Delivery Plan will include specific targets, mechanisms for delivery (including partnership working and funding requirements), and timeframes along with how progress will be monitored and reported.

How will we measure success?

We will:

- Increase the amount of land designated as Local Nature Reserve (LNR), aiming to meet the Natural England ANGSt target of at least one hectare of LNR per 1,000 people
- In accordance with Part 6, Section 103 of the Environment Act 2021, monitor and report on of the amount of BNG secured via the planning system
- Improve the condition of our semi-natural green and blue habitat and aim for “favourable conservation status” for all of our designated sites
- Increase the amount of land designated as SINC and will provide information on how and where our habitats are improving. SINC condition will continue to be monitored and reported back to SCC by HCC
- Increase overall species diversity and restore and improve species populations. We will set clear, specific and measurable targets within our updated local BAP
- Ensure continued compliance with relevant habitat and species related legislation whilst carrying out our duties such as tree works, building maintenance and routine habitat management

Details about what specific targets we are setting in order to see how biodiversity is fairing in our city will be published in our updated BAP. This document will be reviewed and updated regularly for the duration of this strategy. We will also develop a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) to measure our progress in habitat restoration and management and seek to identify means of measuring habitat connectivity through development and implementation of our Green Grid map/s and Green Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

This Biodiversity Strategy, together with the Green Grid work and Green Infrastructure Strategy will contribute to an overall improvement in the health of the city. The wider benefits of a more natural environment are well recognised, helping with carbon storage, flood alleviation, noise reduction, improved air quality and people’s health and wellbeing. We anticipate that making our city greener, more connected and attractive, and therefore a healthier place to live and work, will also result in economic benefits for Southampton.

END OF REPORT