



Parks & Open Spaces Delivery Plan for Biodiversity 2022 – 2026



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Five-Year Action Plan: Top 8 priority projects

1. Introduction

Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) declared a biodiversity and climate emergency in April 2019 recognising the impact climate change is having on our environment and the loss and threats to our species and habitats. Whilst there has been a history of supporting and recognising the broad benefits of parks and open spaces, there is now a greater corporate impetus to derive the greatest benefit possible for biodiversity and eco-system services in our estate.

This Parks and Open Spaces Delivery Plan for Biodiversity sets out the initiatives that will be put in place to further protect and increase biodiversity in MBC managed green spaces and will help identify what additional steps can be taken to ensure these vital places are achieving their full potential. In combination, opportunities are identified to introduce more sustainable grounds maintenance practices and to further encourage public awareness and involvement with wildlife.

This delivery plan does not seek to repeat the detail of the borough Biodiversity and Climate Change Strategy adopted in October 2020, though it should be read in

conjunction with that document to fully understand the context of the action presented here.

Enhancing biodiversity meets several the Council's core aims, including those identified in the Strategic Plan 2019-2045 for themes relating to Safe Clean & Green and the cross-cutting objective that Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected. These priorities are also quickly gaining traction in the population as global, regional, and local impacts of biodiversity loss and climate change are felt and understood.

Along with supporting physical and mental health and wellbeing, ensuring provision of high-quality green spaces and increased tree cover also greatly benefits the borough's residents and visitors by improving air quality, potentially reducing urban summer temperatures, and capturing carbon. Furthermore, investing in green space is proven to improve a region's image and environmental credibility; helping to attract and retain high value industries, new business start-ups, entrepreneurs, and workers.

Although some of the projects and initiatives identified can be achieved through increased volunteering and changes to grounds maintenance practices, it is

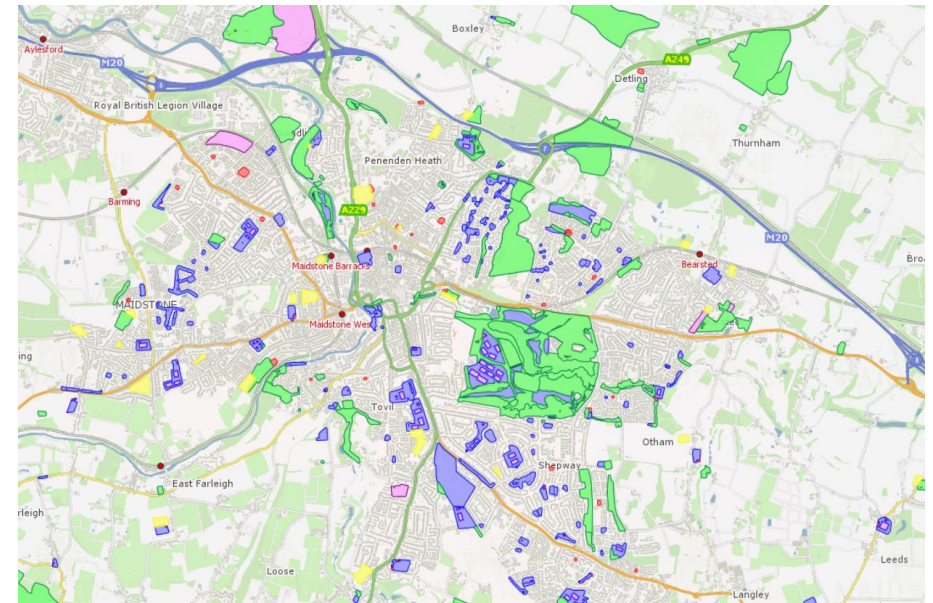
important to recognise that others will only be possible as and when funding becomes available. There is also a finite limit on resources to manage specialised habitats which may impact the delivery of new schemes.

However, there is significant potential to obtain additional funding through various sources, including from the planning process identified within the Biodiversity and Climate Change Strategy. This plan therefore sets out a range of projects and initiatives which can be delivered to maximise the potential of MBC parks and open spaces to achieve high quality, diverse habitats, when resources allow.

2. The Green Resource in Parks

The Council owns and manages just over 425 hectares of publicly accessible green space in the Borough. This includes 30 large parks and 80 neighbourhood green spaces; amongst these areas we have 68 play areas and an array of sports pitches and courts. Additionally, we provide 700 allotment plots across 12 sites.

Four of our parks have been audited and awarded Green Flag status, partly in relation to their management for biodiversity.



The map shows the blanket of MBC green spaces ranging from amenity (blue) and play (red) to natural (green) areas across Maidstone's primary urban area.

3. Current initiatives to support biodiversity

Below is a list of projects and initiatives undertaken to support biodiversity and improve sustainability in the last three years to 2021:

The planting of 2500 new trees at various sites across the Borough, including whips and standards. Mixes of native oak, maple, rowan, birch, lime and cherry all help create biodiverse habitats, this is often enhanced by planting shrub layer and woodland edge species such as hazel, dog rose, crab apple and hawthorn.



Pollinator Friendly Meadow, Gatland Lane

The creation of over 10000m² of bee friendly pollinator meadows – accredited by DEFRA & Bumble Bee Conservation with a Bees’ Needs Award.

Collaborative funding and support of Medway Valley Countryside Partnership to actively manage conservation projects, links to County and regional projects, provision of volunteering opportunities and expert advice to landowners.

Friends of groups and volunteers supported with advice, guidance, and practical assistance as well as £25,000 ‘Go Green Go Wild’ direct funding of biodiversity community projects. Examples include pond creation projects, new wildflower meadows, over 500 trees planted and specialist ‘elver’ monitoring on the River Medway.

Review of potential sites for Local Nature reserves and developing detailed management plans and surveys to declare 6 new Local Nature reserves during 2021-22.

Maidstone Borough in Bloom was launched promoting gardening and rewarding environmentally sustainable competition entries.

Relaxing mowing regimes in areas within parks to support invertebrates and reptiles including supporting ‘No Mow May’ at 5 sites. Reducing strimming around tree roots and mowing under tree canopies where practicable.

Developing skills and understanding of biodiversity issues and opportunities within Parks and Grounds Maintenance staff through training and closer working relationships with park officers.

Clear hierarchy of control for tree works with the presumption of retaining trees and controlling risk wherever possible rather than removal.



No Mow May – Lime Trees, Staplehurst

Specialist approach to identifying and managing veteran and ancient trees under our care with careful consideration of pruning techniques, tree health & vitality, risk management and soil health that are particularly relevant to A&V trees.

4. Aims and benefits of increasing and diversifying habitat

In addition to supporting food chains and increasing diversity of species through the creation of additional and more varied habitat in parks, changes to planting and maintenance practices increases long term environmental resilience and sustainability. Examples include expanding areas of longer grass and shrubs, increasing sources of nectar rich flowers, and planting more trees. This is achieved by:

- Enhancing green corridors and wildlife connectivity between sites by increasing wider availability and range of habitat to address fragmentation.
- Reducing fuel use and carbon emissions by reducing areas maintained as short grass.

- Reducing moisture loss from the ground during increasingly hot, dry summers resulting from climate change, by maintaining more areas of longer grass and other vegetational cover.
- Increasing the number and range of plants for pollinating insects
- Improving air quality by increasing vegetation and tree cover.

There is the additional benefit of increasing visual interest in parks by creating more variety of vegetation and planting. However, some education and awareness may be required to explain changes to planting and rewilding as this can be seen as a reduction in standards or lack of maintenance.

5. Constraints and considerations of increasing and enhancing habitat

The potential to increase and improve wildlife habitat in parks must be balanced against the desire to maintain recreational opportunities for all, particularly at a time when there is a pressing need to encourage active and healthier lifestyles.

Other constraints include the need to manage vegetation to maintain sightlines to provide natural supervision in parks where there is a risk of antisocial behaviour, and the desire to avoid creating litter traps in areas of intense usage.



Staff & volunteers working together in parks

There is also a need to ensure any changes to green spaces are future proofed in the light of proposed housing and population growth, and particular consideration is required for those areas of the borough where expansion and access to certain open space typologies may be required. For example, additional sports pitches may be required to meet future population growth, so areas in parks where there is potential to create additional pitches may, in the short term, be given over to create longer grass or shrub habitat, but not tree planting or pond creation.

Although it is desirable to develop 'high status' or rare habitats, there is a need to address the assumption that areas of short grass in themselves have little or no value to biodiversity. Short grass is not a modern phenomenon created by mowers, but has traditionally been provided by

grazing animals, and is particularly important for the many birds and small mammals that feed on soil invertebrates. As a result of current trends, the availability of this habitat and food source is now also under threat, both within larger green spaces and through the increasing loss of residential front lawns or their replacement with artificial turf. Many urban parks and nature areas provide a haven for wildlife specifically because they provide a mosaic of habitats, including areas of short grass.

It is important to recognise the specific impact of habitat change on the local community as well as the environment. For example, long grass verges will act as a dog mess and litter trap in some areas and make the clearance of litter more difficult and time consuming. This could also have safety implications in hotspots where anti-social behaviour and associated drugs paraphernalia regularly occurs. Therefore, it is important that the location of habitat creation or adaptation is considered so it can achieve a maximum benefit without leading to other unintended consequences that may have an overall net negative impact.

The maintenance of grassed areas in the Borough is a large scale, ongoing operation, requiring considerable staffing and machinery resources. Any changes to the management of these areas must be practical and financially sustainable, considering what investment in equipment or training is required to achieve the desired result. It is important to recognise that changes to maintenance regimes do not

necessarily translate into lower costs or less staff as they may require greater training or more expensive equipment.

This delivery plan sets out proposals that, subject to available funding, seek to enhance biodiversity whilst considering the wider impacts to the community, financial constraints and availability of expertise. It is important that the Borough's Parks and Open Spaces continue to provide a wide range of benefits to wildlife, residents and visitors, remain accessible and promote wellbeing.

6. Conclusions

As outlined in Section 3, significant work is already being undertaken to support biodiversity and introduce more sustainable grounds maintenance practices in the Council's parks and nature areas, but it is vital this process continues with increased vigour and is supported and understood by all our stakeholders including residents, Councillors, contractors and partner organisations.

There is potential to further enhance or create new habitats in the Borough's parks and open spaces whilst meeting the other growing needs of providing high quality amenity, play, recreation, food growing places in the borough. Additionally, the park's estate will be able to assist in our drive to achieve Carbon Net Zero through increased carbon sequestration in the landscape – this will be developed as corporate audits and opportunities arise.

The Borough's resource in parks and open spaces cannot provide for, nor meet all the ambitious targets set out in the boroughwide Biodiversity and Climate Change Strategy.



Volunteers working on Fant Local Nature Reserve

Therefore, the expectations for what can be delivered in our own green spaces needs to be understood in the context of the wider objectives.

The biggest challenge to enhancing, creating and maintaining habitats is ensuring they are well managed for the long term, requiring effective resourcing by a range of

partners and increased involvement from residents. Whilst grant funding often helps with initial costs and capital investment for a positive outcome it inevitably increases the longer-term management needs and revenue costs. There is a common misconception that, overall, managing land for increased biodiversity saves money; however very often important habitats that are now threatened or rare require many years of work to put right decades of neglect. On land that is publicly accessible we also must manage visitors and their needs, protect their safety and protect important habitats and species too.

Therefore, if genuine sustainability and a more biodiverse parks landscape is to be achieved, we must adopt a more nuanced approach to just planting trees and leaving longer grass there is a risk this merely substitutes one form of generic habitat with another, furthermore we must be wise to understanding the value of what we already have through survey and sharing data to avoid overplanting of existing and valued natural habitats.

The council's green spaces can be maintained with the aim of providing a broader range of habitats and food sources for wildlife that creates a more naturalistic balance to parks and open spaces that have for generations , that in the main , have been provided and managed as a habitat for human activity of recreation, amenity, pleasure and sport – change of emphasis is needed and it is coming as we adapt to provide our parks and open spaces as havens of wildlife that are shared with people too.

7. Five Year Action Plan

No.	Objective	Action	Resources & links to	Timescales
1	Biodiversity – Nature Pledge	<p>1.1 All staff and contractors active in managing, influencing and using our parks & open spaces are required to understand and actively commit to protecting and enhancing biodiversity on MBC land by means of signing the MBC Biodiversity Nature Pledge. This will be included in procurement specifications and thus contracts. See Appendix 1</p> <p>1.2 Develop biodiversity and environmental skills, knowledge and understanding in MBC workforce – securing increase in training budget and apprentice opportunities.</p>	BDCC 6.11	Implement 2022 for duration of plan
2	Biodiverse Working Practices: leading by example	<p>2.1 Procurement UK Native tree species – including sourcing only UK grown trees from vetted suppliers wherever possible to reduce the risk of disease and transport/carbon costs.</p> <p>2.2 Selection of planting stock with a presumption of highest biodiversity value, nectar sources, habitat potential</p> <p>2.3 Retain standing deadwood & cordwood at felling site where practicable</p> <p>2.4 Increase visibility of biodiversity enhancements and develop demonstration projects in parks with strong message of borough commitment and educational content. 2022 – Brenchley Gardens – introduce deadwood habitat, increase areas of minimal management, introduce nest box programme (birds, bats, hedgehogs), create wetland habitat.</p> <p>2.5 Annual focus for biodiversity for duration of five-year plan – 2022 Brenchley Gardens, 2023 Whatman Park, 2024 – South Park 2025 – Mote Park 2026 River Len corridor</p>	BDCC 6.2, 6.11	Annual & ongoing

No.	Objective	Action	Resources & links to	Timescales
3	Local Nature Reserves	<p>3.1 Declare 6 new Local Nature Reserves in the borough; 3 of which are MBC parks and open spaces.</p> <p>3.2 Continue the supporting sustainable management at existing LNR sites, nature areas with collaborative working, funding advice and volunteer support</p>	BDCC 6.11	2022
4	Species of Note & Ecological Monitoring	<p>4.1 Bats, Reptiles, Invertebrates, Fauna & flora – promote and encourage ecological monitoring through citizen science, training & engagement, developing connections with existing enthusiasts</p> <p>4.2 Sharing data with K&MBRC – quality data shared ensures valuable records are available for scrutiny, historically accurate as possible and referenced for future development impacts</p>	BDCCS 6.11, 6.10	Annual & ongoing
5	Trees & Woodlands	<p>5.1 Creation & Planting – Review evidence from Tiny Forest /Miyawaki methods. Utilise knowledge in creating new parkland copses.</p> <p>5.2 Management - well managed woodlands with diverse age structure and future trees/forest of scale. Management brief for all wooded areas.</p> <p>5.3 Veteran trees – industry and research best practise applied through strong partnership with Ancient Tree Forum especially regarding Mote Park; develop a 'centre of excellence' with staff, volunteer and industry training</p> <p>5.4 Tree Works & Replacement – Right tree right place - Publish our working standards & practices for tree related matters for residents & Councillors to understand our aims. Presumption of tree retention through effective management and risk reduction. New tree replacements to be chosen for biodiverse benefits, scale, and longevity in the landscape.</p>	BDCCs 6.12, 6.11	<p>5.1 – 2022</p> <p>5.2 – 2024</p> <p>5.3 – 2023</p> <p>5.4 - 2022</p>

No.	Objective	Action	Resources & links to	Timescales
6	Grasslands & Heath	<p>6.1 Expand 'No mow May' where identified as safe and practicable Continue to provide 10000m2 of Pollinator meadows and identify funding to increase to 15000m2 over 5 years</p> <p>6.2 Weavering Heath management plan to develop habitat value and opportunities to favour acid grassland/heath flora within mosaic of neutral grassland, scrub and emerging woodland.</p>	BDCCS 6.11	6.1 -Annual & ongoing 6.2 2022/3
7	Wetlands	<p>Opportunity areas for protecting & increasing biodiversity:</p> <p>7.1 Mallards – manage impacts from user groups – dogs, angling etc – aquatic & marginal biomass increased</p> <p>7.2 Spot Lane – LNR declaration – assessment through ecological survey & management plan</p> <p>7.3 Mote Park - manage impacts from user groups – angling, powered model boats etc – aquatic & marginal biomass increased</p> <p>7.4 Whatman – R. Medway marginal vegetation, slacks & islets - preserve and ensure not lost to silting</p> <p>7.5 River Len corridor – ecological review, improved access & interpretation</p>	BDCCS 6.6, 6.11	7.1- Aspiration for 2022/3 7.2 – 2022 7.3- 2023 7.4 2025 7.5 2024-6
8	Community involvement & Partnerships	<p>8.1 Continue to develop the Maidstone Borough In Bloom competition as platform to engage with residents and businesses to promote positive environmental messages, pollinator friendly gardening</p> <p>8.2 Allotments – support the Maidstone Allotment Management Committee and work with them to develop Environmentally beneficial policies, affect change and a supportive culture for biodiversity to thrive</p> <p>8.3 Friends groups & Volunteering – develop Go Green Go Wild initiative in conjunction with Biodiversity & Climate Change Manager and Medway Valley Countryside Partnership, Kent Wildlife Trust to actively promote & enable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering • Better communication about B&CC initiatives • Monitoring – citizen science, develop skills & network of parks volunteers to monitor & survey fauna, flora & environmental metrics 	BDCCS 6.3, 6.10, 6.5	8.1 Annual & ongoing 8.2 2023 8.3 2022 & ongoing

Monitoring and Review

The Parks and Open Spaces team are responsible for the delivery of this management plan. Lead responsibility lies with the Parks and Open Spaces Manager, overseen by the Head of Environment & Public Realm.

The plan is reviewed annually in March and the delivery of actions is assessed. The reasons for sub-optimal delivery are determined. The action table is reviewed to ensure that actions continue to be relevant and to identify additional actions.

Comments from Green Flag judges are reviewed annually and incorporated into the plan as necessary.

Sections of the plan and action table can be updated as necessary to reflect capacity, opportunities and MBC corporate priorities. An entire revision of the plan takes place every five years.



View Across Mote Park lake

Appendix 1 Nature Pledge

Sign up to the nature pledge;

'I support the protection and improvements to biodiversity in Maidstone's Parks and Open Spaces and will do all that I can in my choices and actions to help create a safe place for nature to thrive'.

Saving nature requires everyone to take responsibility for their impacts on the environment and take positive action.

We encourage people to 1) consider biodiversity in decision-making process through management, procurement and plans, and 2) take positive action in our parks through grounds maintenance tasks, contract works, taking care to protect habitats and give wildlife a home.

This pledge should be taken as an opportunity to examine your opportunities to help nature and make a real commitment.