

Runnymede Borough Council  
Biodiversity Report 2023-2026

March 2026

Classification: Official

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## Introduction

The Environment Act 2021 aims to improve air and water quality, protect wildlife, increase recycling, and reduce plastic waste. The Act includes provisions related to waste and resource efficiency, air quality, water, nature and biodiversity, and the regulation of chemicals. It also amends wording in Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, strengthening the general duty for public bodies so that they must conserve **and enhance** biodiversity.

The Environment Act requires public authorities who operate in England to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. This is the strengthened 'biodiversity duty' that the Act introduced. This means that, as a public authority, Runnymede Borough Council must:

1. Consider what we can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
2. Agree policies and specific objectives based on our consideration.
3. Act to deliver our policies and achieve our objectives.

Our first consideration under the Act was completed in 2023; details can be found in Appendix A.

In order to monitor progress of public bodies against their policies and objectives, the Environment Act requires public bodies to publish a report (the "Biodiversity Report") at regular intervals detailing the actions they have taken, and will take in future, to meet the general biodiversity duty through the performance of their functions.

This document is Runnymede Borough Council's Biodiversity Report for the period 01 January 2023 to 01 January 2026.

The next reporting period will begin on 02 January 2026 and is expected to run for five years, ending on 01 January 2031.

## Local context

Runnymede Borough is located in North West Surrey with a population of 89,400 and covers 7,807 hectares (30.14 square miles), of which 78.63% (6,139 hectares) is Green Belt. Runnymede borders five neighbouring local authorities and is in close proximity to London and Heathrow Airport. The M25 motorway runs through the borough from north to south and the M3 motorway from east to west.

Runnymede is a mix of urban and countryside, with the east of the borough predominantly urban in character containing the three towns of Addlestone, Chertsey and Egham, the settlements of Woodham & New Haw and village of Thorpe. The west of the borough is more rural in character containing the settlements of Englefield Green, Longcross, Lyne, Ottershaw and Virginia Water.

Away from urban areas, the Thames and Wey river valleys and floodplains dominate the landscape to the east and north of the borough. Here the landscape is largely flat and comprises extensive areas of meadows and lakes formed from past mineral extraction. The landscape to the west is more undulating as it moves upwards away from the river valleys and floodplains towards blocks of deciduous and coniferous woodland, agricultural field patterns, landscaped features such as golf courses and areas of heathland and historic parklands.

Within this landscape the borough is home to around 300ha of ancient or replanted woodland and numerous ancient and veteran trees. Many of these woodlands are also identified by Natural England as priority habitat. Other priority habitats in Runnymede include:

- Grasslands such as lowland meadows, good quality semi-improved grassland and lowland calcareous grassland, examples of which can be found at Chertsey Meadows, Runnymede Meadows and Thorpe Hay Meadow;
- Lowland heathland such as that found within the Wentworth Estate;
- Lowland fens at Runnymede Meadows;
- Woodpasture and parkland such as Homewood Park and St Ann's Hill; and
- Traditional orchards such as St Augustine's Nursing Home in Addlestone and Abbey Chase in Chertsey.

The borough contains a number of statutory and non-statutory designated nature conservation sites, comprising:

- One Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site, with an additional three satellite sites recognised as functionally-linked land for the SPA and protected by Local Plan policies;
- One Special Area of Conservation (SAC);
- Five Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI);
- Two Local Nature Reserves (LNR); and
- 35 Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI; also known as Local Wildlife Sites).

Of these designated sites, two LNRs and five of the SNCIs are either wholly or partially owned or managed by the Council.

The Council is responsible for the management of nearly 400 hectares of parks and open spaces around the borough. We do not own or manage any protected sites such as SSSIs, but as a local planning authority we have some indirect responsibility for upholding their protection through the planning system.

Additionally, Surrey Wildlife Trust have identified a network of Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) which aim to direct landscape-scale conservation efforts towards those areas where improved habitat management and the restoration of priority habitats would achieve the greatest benefits for nature conservation. The BOAs are expected to form an important part in the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Surrey. Eight of these Surrey BOAs fall wholly or partly within Runnymede and many areas of Council-owned land fall within them.

[The State of Surrey's Nature 2017](#) reported that Surrey is experiencing severe biodiversity loss at higher rates than the national average of 2% (around 1 in 9 species in Surrey are now locally extinct), and:

- 4.4% of species were classified as threatened with extinction (based on IUCN criteria).
- 2.8% are near threatened.
- 13.8% of species are deemed rare.

## Policies relevant to biodiversity conservation

In December 2023, we [declared a climate emergency](#), which recognises that as a local authority we have “an obligation to limit the negative impacts of [...] biodiversity loss”. Through the adoption of this policy position, responsibility for setting objectives is delegated to individual service areas through their service area plans and business as usual activities.

In February 2024, the Council published our first [Climate Change Action Plan](#) as a follow up to our Climate Change Strategy 2022-2030 which detailed the Council’s plan to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030. This was subsequently renamed the Climate Change and Nature Action Plan to reflect the inclusion of actions to enhance biodiversity. The Action Plan recognises that “biodiversity loss is closely intertwined with the climate emergency, with wildlife declining as a direct result of climate change amongst other causes. The Council has a statutory duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity through the Environment Act 2021, which mean that we must review and adjust our ways of working to benefit nature.” This Action Plan sets objectives for individual services areas around the theme of the natural environment and biodiversity and progress against these objectives is monitored by the Corporate Management Committee regularly.

Most recently, the Council declared our full commitment to conserving and enhancing biodiversity in October 2025 with the approval of the [Corporate Business Plan 2026-27](#) which puts tackling the climate emergency and enhancing nature at the heart of the Council’s agenda and formally sets an overarching objective to positively influence our environment by embedding climate change avoidance and mitigation, sustainability and promotion of biodiversity and conservation in all Council decisions and actions. Both over this reporting period and into the future, many of the Council’s actions towards biodiversity enhancement fall within business as usual activities, reflecting our commitment to enhancing nature across the array of statutory and discretionary services we offer.

The Runnymede Local Plan 2030 contains several policies which require development to conserve and enhance the natural environment:

- SL25 Existing Open Space
- EE1: Townscape and Landscape Quality
- EE9: Biodiversity, Geodiversity and Nature Conservation (including requirements for net gain)
- EE11: Green Infrastructure
- EE12: Blue Infrastructure

The Council published our Green and Blue Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document in November 2021. Green and Blue Infrastructure describes the network of natural spaces and resources which facilitate the movement of wildlife and the functioning of environmental systems past, through and in between the built environment.

## **Actions taken to comply with the biodiversity duty**

Runnymede Borough Council is committed to enhancing nature as a core principle of what we do. This is reflected in the policies and objectives we directly set to protect biodiversity, but also in the business as usual activities carried out by our teams without formal objectives. Teams across the Council have reported on the activities they have undertaken during the reporting period of this Biodiversity Report 2023-2026 and their responses collated into the section below. These have been broken down into broad themes of **Corporate policies and governance, Land management and habitat enhancement, Awareness, education and community engagement, Planning and enforcement, Data gathering and monitoring** and **Partnership working**. These themes reflect the areas in which we have the greatest impact as changemakers.

As required by the Environment Act 2021, the Council's Open Space Development Team produced a paper setting out our first consideration of actions the Council could take, and this was refined into the actions and objectives set out above. This work was completed in December 2023 and is included as Appendix A.

### **Corporate policies and governance**

- We produced a paper setting out our first considerations for actions the Council could take to meet the biodiversity duty in December 2023. This is included as Appendix A.
- We created a Biodiversity Officer position to fill a recognised gap in biodiversity expertise within the Council.
- We developed a Meadow Policy to formally designate certain Council grasslands as meadows and set out management practices for them. This policy covers 77 hectares of meadows and resulted in the addition of five hectares of new meadow created in areas which were previously managed as amenity grasslands of low biodiversity value. Baseline botanical species lists against which we can assess resultant enhancements in biodiversity have been established.
- Our committee report template has been updated to ensure that a consideration of biodiversity impacts is made for all proposals being considered by Members.
- A ban on fireworks displays on Council land was instituted from April 2025 to protect wildlife from disturbance and reduce the potential for catastrophic wildfires.
- We enacted a new sustainable planting policy from 2023, with planting designed to support native wildlife and encourage biodiversity by favouring native perennial species over annuals and non-natives. This policy also minimises the use of herbicides in favour of alternative weed control measures and minimises the use of peat-based compost and mulch.

### **Land management and habitat enhancement**

- We have secured a Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) agreement with Defra for two of the Council's designated meadow sites, at Homewood Park and Bourne Meadows. The meadow management and enhancement areas designated under this scheme cover a total of 11.35 hectares across the two sites.
- We spent a Farming Recovery Fund grant on biodiversity remediation at Chertsey Meads and Thorpe Green.
- Officers from Open Space Development and Green Spaces have worked with corporate volunteers and local volunteer groups to undertake control and removal of the invasive species Himalayan Balsam, Rhododendron and Cherry Laurel on many Council-owned sites.
- Herbicide use is now restricted to the maintenance of bowling greens and pesticides are only in use for the control of Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) and domestic

vermin. Discussions are ongoing about ceasing the use of pesticides for OPM in favour of less environmentally damaging control methods.

- At Chertsey Meads, a lost pond has been restored, a new hedgerow planted and overdue riparian tree management carried out in line with recommendations from Surrey Wildlife Trust.
- We have applied for a Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier agreement at Chertsey Meads, committing the Council to improved management of the meadows, hedgerows and reedbeds on this Local Nature Reserve and Site of Nature Conservation Importance. The ultimate aim for the Council is to regain the Site of Special Scientific Interest designation that the site once held in recognition of its outstanding botanical diversity.
- We invested in removing significant areas of Rhododendron and Cherry Laurel from the ancient woodland at St Ann's Hill in 2023 in order to permit natural regeneration of the tree stock and restoration of the ecosystem.
- We have begun designating areas within some parks for on-site composting of green waste arising from grounds maintenance activities, both providing habitat within the piles themselves and ensuring that invertebrates living on the green waste are able to return to their preferred habitat.
- We have planted approximately 6,000 trees on Council-owned land since 2023, of which around 99.5% have been native species.
- Standing deadwood is left in place in woodlands to provide additional habitat wherever the location and safety concerns permit this. Felled wood is retained on-site in habitat piles for the benefit of wildlife.
- We have directed the planting of disease-resistant Elms in parts of the borough near known populations of the S41 White-letter Hairstreak to provide dispersal corridors into the wider landscape.
- We have harvested wildflower seeds from the Council's highly biodiverse meadow at Chertsey Meads and will use this to overseed less diverse meadows at other sites around Runnymede.
- We installed Camera Assisted Enforcement (CAE) in four major car parks instead of ANPR. Compared to traditional barrier systems, CAE requires less physical infrastructure (no large gates, less cabling for sensors) thus leading to a smaller environmental footprint during installation and less disturbance to the immediate environment.
- We have directed funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to biodiversity enhancement projects at St Ann's Hill and Frank Muir Memorial Field. This funding will result in the creation of a new meadow, the restoration and enhancement of three ponds, and the removal of invasive species from these sites.

### **Awareness, education and community engagement**

- We have engaged young people through the Junior Citizen programme in 2024 and 2025, running sessions on biodiversity and climate topics.
- We organised and supported the local delivery of the Great Big Green Week initiative in 2023, 2024 and 2025, encouraging local groups to participate and producing materials to raise awareness of and celebrate events taking place across the borough. The team also developed a programme of Great Big Green Week activities for Council staff which included planting pollinator-friendly species in local parks.
- We have funded workshops in schools which were delivered to an estimated 1,500 students in 2025. As part of this work, focussing broadly on environmental protection, students were encouraged to think about ways to support biodiversity in their LEGO creations, such as including trees, wildflowers and ponds.
- The Council has created the Runnymede Community Environment Champion network to bring together people from across the borough to promote more

environmentally conscious communities, expand and improve knowledge transfer between groups, support the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities and scale up positive impact.

- We also formed a Staff Environment Champions Network and staff interest group for officers with a shared passion for the environment and biodiversity to come together and learn about topics, initiatives and events taking place in the borough as well as to share knowledge and discuss Council activities.
- In July 2025, we ran a public nature engagement event at Chertsey Meads to coincide with National Meadows Day, bringing in experts on moths, plants and bats to educate and inspire members of the public about the importance of biodiversity and celebrate the Council's most important meadow site.
- The Junior Rangers programme was created in 2024 and runs from September to March each year, training young people between the ages of 13-18 in green skills such as habitat management, species identification and ecological theory to enable them to pursue a career in the environmental sector.
- Environmental volunteering opportunities are advertised on the Council's website and have been promoted via the Council's external communications channels, enabling residents and potential volunteers who wish to contribute towards protection and enhancement of the natural environment to easily contact organisations offering such opportunities within Runnymede.
- Our Communications team have also promoted environmental initiatives including Great Big Green Week, Runnymede Junior Rangers and the Runnymede Community Environment Champions network.

## **Planning and enforcement**

- The planning enforcement team was made aware of the wilful destruction of protected trees within a woodland area covered by Tree Preservation Order. The matter is currently within the court system. A replanting scheme has been secured and implemented and is being monitored by officers. The defendant has entered a guilty plea, but the case is currently adjourned due to lack of court time, and because no financial details had been put before the court by the defendant. The case continues and sentencing is awaited. £20,001 has been recovered from the defendant to cover the Council's costs.
- Planning Enforcement continues to take the necessary action where appropriate to protect and restore biodiversity and matters related to it through investigating and where necessary acting against breaches of conditions and unauthorised development.

## **Data gathering and monitoring**

- The Council worked with the Friends of Cabrera Trust Woodland to arrange surveys by experts from the Woodland Trust at Cabrera Trust Riverside Walk. These were carried out in July 2025 and will provide officers and Trustees with valuable data for an updated site ecological management plan.
- We arranged for 114ha of Council land across five sites to be surveyed as part of a BNG habitat bank suitability assessment, in collaboration with Surrey County Council.
- We have collaborated with Butterfly Conservation's Surrey branch to establish a regular butterfly transect at Chertsey Meads which enables long-term monitoring of population trends.
- We connected with Surrey Botanical Society to carry out botanical surveys at Homewood Park and Barrsbrook Farm and thereby establish baselines against which future enhancements can be measured.

- The Council's Biodiversity Officer provides species records obtained through the course of their work to the Local Records Centre and recording schemes to ensure this data contributes to scientific understanding of population trends and distributions. New colonies of Brown Hairstreak and White-letter Hairstreak have been discovered in this way.
- We commissioned a survey to establish the number, healthy and natural capital value of trees on our land. This revealed that the Council manages approximately 258,000 trees of a variety of species.

### **Partnership working**

- We have joined the Wey Landscape Partnership steering group, facilitating closer partnership working with landowners and other stakeholders throughout the Wey and Bourne catchments.
- We have worked closely with partners at Surrey County Council on the preparation of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Surrey, using our local knowledge to identify sites which should be incorporated into the strategy and to suggest potential measures to aid nature recovery.
- We have engaged with the River Thames Scheme as a supporting partner, ensuring that existing biodiversity is conserved during delivery and operation of the scheme and that biodiversity enhancements are delivered through a higher-than-mandatory 20% Biodiversity Net Gain target for the project.
- We have also engaged with the plans for Heathrow expansion at this early stage, pressing to ensure that biodiversity will be conserved and enhanced within Runnymede to offset any impacts.

## How we plan to comply with the biodiversity duty in the next reporting period

The next reporting period covers the five years from 2026 to 2031. However, it was announced in 2025 that, from the 2027-28 municipal year, Runnymede Borough Council would merge with other Surrey councils to form a new unitary authority as part of UK Government's plans for local government reorganisation. The abolition of Runnymede Borough Council means that some targets set out below may not be achieved before the Council ceases to exist (although they may be adopted by the new unitary authority) and the reporting period is likely to be curtailed from the 2026-2031 timeframe. The Environment Act allows for early reporting of the actions that a local authority has taken to comply with the biodiversity duty, and discussions will take place before the new unitary authority is formed to decide when to end the reporting period and how best to report on Runnymede Borough Council's actions up to that point.

The Runnymede Borough Council Corporate Business Plan 2026-27 is expected to cover the period until the Council is abolished. The Plan formally sets an overarching objective to positively influence our environment by embedding climate change avoidance and mitigation, sustainability and promotion of biodiversity and conservation in all Council decisions and actions, which will be reflected in service area plans and business as usual activities. Other existing Council policies, objectives and actions set out in sections above will also continue to apply through this time period.

The following sections detail the actions that Runnymede Borough Council plans to take in the period between 02 January 2026 and 01 January 2031, broken down into themes of **Land management and enhancement, Awareness, education and community engagement, Planning and policy, Data gathering and monitoring** and **Partnership working**.

### Land management and habitat enhancement

- We will be investing in maintenance of five car parks in 2026. While the immediate focus is on urgent safety repairs, the Council's long-term strategy for these car parks includes an incremental investment in green infrastructure to improve biodiversity, manage surface water, and mitigate the urban heat island effect, in line with the principles of the Environment Act 2021. The proposed capital works will have a positive environmental impact by cleaning and repairing drainage systems, thereby reducing the discharge of pollutants into local watercourses.
- We will deliver the biodiversity-focused CIL projects at Frank Muir Memorial Field and St Ann's Hill, which include a new wildflower meadow, pond enhancements and invasive species removal
- Officers will continue to investigate the potential use of 14.46ha of land at Barrsbrook Farm, with the possibility of an additional 4.9ha of land at Sandgates, as a BNG habitat bank and Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace.
- Starting with a review of prospects for our land holdings within the LNRS, BOAs and SNCIs to assess potential, we will take a targeted approach to biodiversity enhancement opportunities on our landholdings.
- We will carry out habitat improvements at Chertsey Meads LNR and SNCI, including scrub removal, meadow expansion, rotational reedbed management and hedgerow planting.
- We will continue to utilise the existing botanically-rich meadow at Chertsey Meads as a source of local seed for meadow expansion projects elsewhere in the borough, and

through community engagement events we will recruit local volunteers to spread the seed and foster a sense of ownership of their local green spaces.

- We will utilise budgets that are designated for biodiversity enhancement to continue the invasive species removal programme across our landholdings, with the ultimate aim of achieving complete removal of invasive woody shrubs and good control of river-associated invasives such as Himalayan Balsam, and continue to restore ponds and other priority habitat features lost from our landholdings.
- We will support community groups to develop allotments, which will include providing advice on ways to enhance biodiversity on their plots.
- We will explore the feasibility of heathland restoration at Ether Hill, as set out in the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy, taking the view that this would be the preferred outcome for the site given its proximity to the heathland SNCI at Queenwood Golf Course.
- We will work to reestablish a management regime incorporating cattle grazing at Chertsey Meads and Barrsbrook Farm, where the cessation of grazing has caused a decline in the biodiversity value of both sites.
- Where Council owned buildings are used to deliver key services and are identified for retention, future consideration will be given within the context of the unitary development to the potential incorporation of biodiversity enhancements. Any such measures would be subject to affordability, value for money, and their ability to be delivered without constraining or compromising the building's current or future operational use. Indicative measures could include, for example, the installation of bird boxes or other habitat or nesting features

### **Awareness, education and community engagement**

- The Communications team will continue to promote biodiversity initiatives and environmental volunteering opportunities around the borough.
- We will continue efforts to expand our volunteer networks and provide opportunities for volunteering on nature- and biodiversity-related initiatives. Officers in the Open Spaces and Climate Change teams will work collaboratively to maximise synergies in our work, for example by facilitating links between the Community Environment Champions network and biodiversity enhancement projects around the borough.
- We will continue to run the Junior Rangers, Junior Citizen and community engagement programmes to educate, train and inspire people on environmental topics including biodiversity.
- We will support Neighbourhood Forums in the preparation of robust evidence to inform policy requirements in emerging Neighbourhood Plans which seek to enhance biodiversity through new development.

### **Planning and policy**

- At such time as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Surrey is published, we will incorporate the areas there designated into planning decisions and will use it to assess strategic significance within the statutory Biodiversity Metric.
- We will continue to work with infrastructure providers and community organisations/groups to implement the Council's annual Strategic Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Funding Programme and Neighbourhood CIL Funding procedures, identifying and allocating CIL funds to infrastructure schemes to support new development, including schemes which aim to improve biodiversity via green infrastructure enhancements, in accordance with the Council's Infrastructure Delivery Schedules and Infrastructure Funding Statements.

- We will continue to collect SANG and SAMM contributions for mitigating development around the Thames Basin Heaths SPA through S106 agreements for relevant development proposals.
- We will explore the viability of requiring 20% BNG uplift from development, above the 10% statutory minimum, following on from the work of the Surrey Nature Partnership in assessing the viability of this requirement in Surrey.

### **Data gathering and monitoring**

- We will require that species records obtained from any ecological reports sponsored by the Council are transferred to the Local Records Centre, ensuring that these records can contribute to further research and conservation efforts.

### **Partnership working**

- We will continue working with partner organisations such as the South East Rivers Trust to secure funding for enhancement of river habitats at Gogmore Farm Park, Sayes Court Open Space and Cabrera Trust Riverside Walk.
- We will continue working closely with the Surrey Nature Partnership, other local authorities and the voluntary sector to deliver impactful projects for biodiversity at landscape scale.
- The Council will be looking to update its Social Value Policy and introduce a tool to be used within procurement activities, which includes the opportunity for Bidders to commit to undertaking biodiversity friendly activities

## Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) reporting

The Development Management Service implements the government's biodiversity statutory planning legislation which includes the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) framework, where every planning application unless an exemption applies is subject to a condition that the development must achieve a 10% increase in biodiversity value relative to the pre-development biodiversity value of the onsite habitat.

### Biodiversity Net Gain Development Management Monitoring Report

Since its introduction 16 developments are subject to the mandatory BNG condition.

- 2 developments have discharged their BNG condition by purchasing off site units at Wild Cobham Elmbridge - totalling 0.21 habitat units and 0.05 hedgerow units.
- 2 developments have discharged their net gain condition providing on site gain totalling 4.84 habitat units and 3.01 hedgerow units.

Of the remaining 12 sites (still to discharge their condition) it is envisaged that:

- 4 developments will purchase units totalling 2.54 habitat units and 0.987 hedgerow units
- 8 developments will provide onsite totalling 87.41 habitat units, 10.41 hedgerow units and 6.62 watercourse units.

Summary table – units secured

	Habitat	Hedgerow	Watercourse
<b>Number of units secured off site (units purchased) - condition discharged</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Number of units secured on site- condition discharged</b>	<b>4.84</b>	<b>3.01</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.05</b>	<b>3.06</b>	<b>0.00</b>

Summary table – units expected

	Habitat	Hedgerow	Watercourse
<b>Number of units envisaged off site (condition still to be discharged)</b>	<b>2.54</b>	<b>0.987</b>	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Number of units envisaged on site (condition still to be discharged)</b>	<b>87.41</b>	<b>10.41</b>	<b>6.62</b>

	<b>Habitat</b>	<b>Hedgerow</b>	<b>Watercourse</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>89.95</b>	<b>11.397</b>	<b>6.62</b>

The total net gain of units from BNG is 95 habitat units, 14.457 hedgerow units and 6.62 watercourse units.

### **Monitoring**

Through s106 agreements £15,000 has been secured to assist in the monitoring of the Habitat Monitoring and Management Plans for on-site provision that sit alongside the BNG condition. This aids in the implementation, monitoring and maintenance of the biodiversity uplift secured for a 30-year period.

# Appendix A

## First consideration of actions to comply with Environment Act 2021

Runnymede Borough Council

December 2023

### **Introduction and background**

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 introduced a statutory duty upon all public bodies, including local authorities, to conserve biodiversity. The Environment Act 2021 amended the NERC Act to strengthen this biodiversity duty and a public body is now required to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Effectively, continuing with business as usual is no longer sufficient for public bodies to meet their statutory duty towards biodiversity.

Local authorities must consider what action they can take for biodiversity by 01 January 2024 and agree policies and objectives as soon as possible after this. This document sets out Runnymede Borough Council's first consideration of what actions have been taken since 01 January 2023 (the start of the reporting period) and what actions the Council could take in future to meet this enhanced duty. The Council will review, reconsider and update the actions it could take no later than 01 January 2029.

### **Existing Runnymede Borough Council policies and strategies**

Runnymede Borough Council has several existing and forthcoming strategies and policies which contribute to its aim to conserve and enhance biodiversity across the borough:

- The Runnymede Local Plan 2030 contains several policies which require development to conserve and enhance the natural environment:
  - SL25 Existing Open Space
  - EE1: Townscape and Landscape Quality
  - EE9: Biodiversity, Geodiversity and Nature Conservation (including requirements for net gain)
  - EE11: Green Infrastructure
  - EE12: Blue Infrastructure
- The Council published its Green and Blue Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document in November 2021. Green and Blue Infrastructure describes the network of natural spaces and resources which facilitate the movement of wildlife and the functioning of environmental systems past, through and in between the human built environment. Production of a Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy is progressing with input from officers across the Council and stakeholders from a wide range of organisations.
- In December 2023, the Council declared a climate emergency and began consulting on its draft Climate Change Action Plan. This followed on from the previous publication of the Climate Change Strategy 2022-2030, which detailed the Council's plan to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

### **Linked strategies from other organisations**

- Several regional and national policies are expected to come into force over the period included in this first consideration, and Runnymede Borough Council commits to constructively engaging with such policies as they come online. We will have regard to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, species conservation strategies and protected sites strategies as and when they are published by UK Government, and

the Council will engage fully with the organisations and stakeholders who are developing them to provide input before publication.

- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is expected to become a mandatory component of the planning system for major developments from January 2024 and for minor developments from April 2024. BNG aims to enhance habitats by at least 10% above the baseline pre-development value which will benefit wildlife. Secondary guidance on the implementation of BNG was published by Defra in late November 2023 and sets out how local authorities are to manage mandatory BNG within the planning system. In line with national policy, Runnymede Borough Council will require development to evidence a 10% biodiversity net gain.
- Surrey County Council's Tree Strategy sets out that they will plant 1.2 million trees across the county by 2030 to help achieve carbon neutrality. Runnymede Borough Council will work with SCC to identify sites within the borough which are suitable for tree planting to help SCC achieve this aim and bring the benefits of increased tree cover to residents.
- Surrey Wildlife Trust has identified strategic Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs) across the county which hold the highest potential for nature restoration. Eight such BOAs fall wholly or partly within the borough. Until such time as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy has been finalised, BOAs are expected to demarcate the "strategic significance" unit multiplier within BNG metric calculations, and development within the borough is expected to have regard to the presence of BOAs. The BOAs located within Runnymede are as follows:
  - TV01 Windsor Great Park
  - TV02 Runnymede Meadows and Slope
  - TV04 Thorpe and Shepperton
  - TBH01 Chobham Common North and Wentworth Heaths
  - TBH02 Chobham South Heaths
  - TBH05 Woking Heaths
  - R04 River Wey and tributaries
  - R06 River Thames (towpath and islands)

### **Current actions by the Council to conserve biodiversity**

- Runnymede Borough Council owns and manages Chertsey Meads, a 73ha floodplain meadow which is designated as a Local Nature Reserve and Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace, and was formerly designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The Council wishes to achieve a return to SSSI status and has entered the site into a Countryside Stewardship agreement with Defra to support the enhanced management required to bring Chertsey Meads up to the required standard for this to happen. This agreement is coming to an end in 2023 but a new Sustainable Farming Initiative (or similar) agreement will be sought to continue this management.
- Surrey Wildlife Trust have been commissioned to produce management plans for several open spaces of high conservation potential. These plans help to enhance the management of the Council's green spaces to maximise their value to wildlife and the environment.
- Parts of Runnymede Borough are subject to the requirement to provide Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) to mitigate the impact of development on the nearby sensitive habitats of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area. The Council operates six strategic SANGs, using contributions from developers to fund the infrastructure required of SANGs to act as mitigation for recreation of the Special Protection Area.

- In 2023 the Council replaced the majority of its flowerbed annual species with perennial species which require less intensive management, bringing benefits to soil microbiota, carbon savings and reduced chemical usage.

### **Future actions the Council could take**

The Council considers that the following are actions it could take to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

#### **Biodiversity Report**

- As required by the Environment Act 2021, Runnymede Borough Council will produce a Biodiversity Report detailing the actions it has taken towards meeting the enhanced biodiversity duty, the expected gains from BNG as a result of development in the borough, and future plans for continued compliance with the enhanced biodiversity duty, for a reporting period ending no later than 01 January 2026. This report will be published on the Council's website no more than 12 weeks after the date on which the reporting period ends. The length of the subsequent reporting period will be detailed in the Biodiversity Report and will not exceed five years.

#### **Improved land management**

- Runnymede Borough Council is a major landowner within the borough and manages a network of green spaces for public amenity. Public benefits are also derived from the natural capital and ecosystem services that such spaces provide and there is scope to manage some of these spaces less intensively, which will improve their biodiversity value. Officers from across the Council will explore options for low-intensity management of urban grasslands such as parks, cemeteries and allotments. Consideration will be given to restoring priority habitats on the Council's landholdings where appropriate and feasible.
- The Council has previously entered Chertsey Meads into a Countryside Stewardship agri-environment scheme which offers payments for wildlife-friendly management of land. The existing agreement is ending in 2023 and a review will be undertaken to identify further areas of the Council's countryside estate which can be managed for wildlife under Countryside Stewardship or related agri-environment schemes.
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) will become mandatory from 2024. For those developments which cannot meet the statutory 10% requirement within the footprint of the development itself, a secondary option is to deliver the gains off-site but within the boundaries of the same Local Planning Authority or National Character Area. Council officers from RBC and SCC have been exploring opportunities for delivering BNG on council-owned land within Runnymede and from early 2024 will be engaging an ecological consultancy to carry out baseline surveys of selected sites with the intention that these be put forward for habitat improvement works paid for by developers.
- The Council will work with bodies such as the Woodland Trust, Forestry Commission and other stakeholders to improve the condition of council-owned woodland. It will also explore options for creating new woodlands, preferentially through encouraging natural regeneration but if necessary also through planting, on suitable sites. Where sites are unsuitable (e.g. because they support important grassland communities), boundary hedgerow creation will be explored as an alternative means of increasing habitat diversity. The Council's Tree Strategy is to be reviewed and updated in 2024.

#### **Community engagement and raising awareness**

- Runnymede Borough Council considers that empowering local communities to appreciate the biodiversity and value of the local environment will lead to increased pro-environmental behaviours. The Council will highlight and celebrate the biodiversity of the borough in our published materials. The monthly Climate Change and Sustainability newsletter produced and distributed by the Council will include articles on positive steps and behaviours that recipients can take to boost biodiversity in their everyday lives.
- The Council will seek to work with schools, youth programmes and the voluntary sector to develop schemes for education and training which complement the national curriculum and develop skills which are sought after by employers.
- The Council will support community-led initiatives which aim to improve biodiversity and habitats within the borough by signposting funding opportunities, fostering links with existing volunteer groups and looking to form new groups where possible. Initiatives such as In Bloom will be supported by the Council where possible.
- The Council will engage with national campaigns such as Great Big Green Week, coordinating, promoting and supporting events across the borough.

### **Partnership working**

- The Council will continue to work with partner organisations such as Surrey Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the Environment Agency and Surrey County Council to bring forward initiatives which will benefit biodiversity in the borough and across the wider landscape. Where other new partnership opportunities arise during this reporting period we will be positively inclined towards becoming involved.
- In 2024 the Council will join the Wey Landscape Partnership to work with organisations towards improving the quality of Water Framework Directive waterbodies within the Wey, Addlestone Bourne and Chertsey Bourne river catchments.
- The Council will consult with species-interest groups such as Surrey Bat Group, Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group and Surrey Botanical Society to utilise their knowledge and experience when enhancing priority habitats in strategic areas for the benefit of range-restricted species.
- The Council acts both as a proposer and a regulator for the forthcoming River Thames Scheme. Officers will continue to work with the proposers and partner organisations to maximise the delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain commitments and other biodiversity benefits related to the scheme.

### **Designated sites and priority habitats**

- The Council will work towards restoring Chertsey Meads to Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status. This site was previously notified as a SSSI until the 1980s when the status was lost following inappropriate management, but is recovering following sensitive management by the Council over many years. The Council will continue to engage with Natural England, Surrey Wildlife Trust and the Chertsey Meads Management Liaison Group to ensure that the site continues on this trajectory and will put forward the site as a candidate SSSI when it is felt appropriate to do so.
- There are currently two designated Local Nature Reserves (LNR) in Runnymede at Cabrera Trust Riverside Walk and Chertsey Meads. The Council will draw up a shortlist of candidate LNRs and engage with external experts to identify those sites which justify the LNR designation before beginning the process of listing these with Natural England. Local Nature Reserves will be included in the network of sites

incorporated into the forthcoming Local Nature Recovery Strategy which is expected to bring forward new funding opportunities in the future.

- The Surrey Nature Partnership's Local Sites Advisory Panel determines the criteria for including sites on Surrey's list of Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI). SNCIs are areas whose species assemblages or habitats are of county-importance in the conservation of biodiversity. At present there are 35 such SNCIs falling wholly or partly within Runnymede and their protection is required under the Runnymede Local Plan 2030. Of the SNCIs, five are either wholly or partly owned or managed by RBC and these sites in particular will be targeted for enhanced intervention to ensure they are still fulfilling the criteria under which they were first selected.

### **Internal strategies and policies**

- Officers will produce a Biodiversity Strategy for the borough, setting out the existing "state of nature" within the area and actions that can be taken to enhance biodiversity. This will lead on to the production of a Biodiversity Action Plan with defined goals and targets for nature recovery within Runnymede.
- The Council will finalise its Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and Climate Change Action Plan following consultation with appropriate stakeholders and partners.
- The Council will incorporate pro-environmental requirements for building and development into the mandatory design code to be drafted in 2024.
- The Council's Biodiversity Officer will brief corporate heads on the requirements arising from the Environment Act and will be available to brief on and discuss matters relating to ecology and biodiversity with all service areas of Runnymede Borough Council.
- The Committee Report template will be updated to incorporate examples and/or guidance text on environmental, sustainability and biodiversity implications which should be considered in all reports going before committees.

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