

***A VISION FOR GUILDFORD'S
COUNTRYSIDE
2016 - 2026***

DRAFT 25/01/2017

ADD FORWARD

1. Background (Where we are)

Guildford Borough Council (GBC) owns and manages 52 sites as countryside sites covering an area of nearly 700ha, 2.5% of the Borough's land area. Guildford Borough Council also manages approximately 32km of rural road verges on behalf of Surrey County Council.

These areas contribute to a network of publically accessible countryside as well as wildlife habitat managed by other landowners, such as Surrey County Council, National Trust and Surrey Wildlife Trust. In order to recognise the importance of working across landownership boundaries, GBC is represented in a number of landscape partnerships, including Surrey Nature Partnership, Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership and the Surrey Heathland Project.

Within the GBC's countryside estate, two heathland sites (Bullswater Common and Pirbright Heath) are afforded strong protection through inclusion in the Thames Basin Heath SPA (Special Protection Area) and the Ash to Brookwood Heaths SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest). Shalford Water Meadows is included in the Wey Valley Meadows SSSI. The Borough's countryside estate also includes five Local Nature Reserves, the highest protection Local Authorities can designate. The designation of Riverside Nature Reserve that covers Abbotswood Paddock, Thorneycroft Wood, Weylea Farm, Stoke Water Meadows and Riverside recognises the connectivity of these areas as an ecological unit.

Guildford Borough Council's countryside sites provide opportunities for recreation, physical activity and access to nature. A significant proportion of site users visit the countryside to walk their dog. There is an increasing trend to visit open spaces in order to carry out physical activity and exercise. The education sector recognises the importance of outdoor education, for example in the growing trend of Forest Schools, and Guildford's countryside sites can provide opportunities for education events.

Visitor counters are installed at Chantry Wood and Riverside Nature Reserve, which show that visitor numbers have almost doubled between 2012 and 2015.¹

Guildford Borough Council is covered by four National Landscape Character Areas (NCA); Thames Basin Heaths, Thames Basin Lowlands, North Downs and Wealden Green Sand.²

Natural England have, in line with Biodiversity 2020³, developed NCA profile documents for areas that share similar landscape characteristics to provide a decision making framework for the natural environment. They contain a number of statements of opportunity to maintain and enhance the landscape for a sustainable future.

87ha of Guildford's Countryside, mainly at Chantry Woods, lie within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

2. Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services

The countryside sites provide a range of eco system services. Eco system services are the benefits people obtain from functioning eco systems. These include provisioning services (wood fuel, grazing pasture), regulating services (flood alleviation, water purification, carbon sequestration) and cultural services (recreation).

In addition, functioning habitats and ecosystems are necessary to enable the development of the ecosystem services, for example through water cycling, nutrient cycling, soil formation and biomass production.

Eco system services are not only provided by larger countryside sites. Small spaces such as road verges and the edges of common land provide opportunities to provide ecosystem services in the landscape.

To many people the landscape of the countryside also has an aesthetic and cultural value that is difficult to quantify, but contributes to the health and wellbeing in the community.

Increases in population densities in the Southeast, and the resulting increase in housing, reduce the availability of natural capital whilst increasing the demand on ecosystem services. It is therefore important that we manage the natural capital on our landholdings with the view to continue providing benefits for future generations.

In January 2015, the Natural Capital Committee published its third State of Natural Capital⁴ report that sets out a number of recommendations for achieving the Government's vision, "to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than it inherited".

In its green growth agenda the Government plans to strengthen the green economy by growing sustainably, while reducing emissions, using natural resources effectively and becoming more resilient for long term economic benefit.^{5,6}

The State of Natural Capital report highlights the importance of green spaces to our physical and mental health as well as importance for the economy. The Department of Health suggests that access to green space reduces national health care costs by £2billion/year, especially through the positive long-term effects on mental health.

It is understood that poor air quality affects the economy negatively, and this can be applied to an increased risk of flooding and reduced availability of fresh water.

The Government updated its Planning Practice Guidance in February 2016 and added further details on green infrastructure within the guidance's Natural Environment Section that include guidance on the need for long term planning for green infrastructure including its management and maintenance. The updates also include a clarification that the Community Infrastructure Levy can be used as funding mechanism.⁷

The Surrey Nature Partnership launched "Naturally Richer: A Natural Capital Investment Strategy for Surrey" in November 2015⁸. This document provides a targeted strategy to deliver its vision for a thriving, resilient and attractive county providing natural benefits to all

who live and work here. It highlights the value of nature for Surrey's people and economy, but also the pressures through unsustainable use of land and its resources. The strategy lists sustainable land management, smart economic growth and health, wellbeing and quality of life as strategic priorities and the principles and mechanism for delivery of these priorities. The Surrey Nature Partnership intends to develop an investment plan for Surrey's Natural Capital in 2017.

The Capital Investment Strategy is informed by the Valuing Surrey study⁹ that the Surrey Nature Partnership commissioned in a first attempt to gather information about the County's natural capital asset and its link to local economic development. This study focussed on woodlands and the River Wey catchment. The value of Surrey's woodland areas is estimated at £90 million annually, providing a resource for 18 million visits, reduction of healthcare costs, carbon sequestration and to a small extent timber value. Scaling this estimate down, Guildford's woodlands would provide an approximate annual value of over £750,000 to society.

In 2014, Guildford Borough Council's cost related to flooding was £434,000, of which £74,000 is attributed to the loss of natural capital within the Wey flood zone in the past 20 years.

The Valuing Surrey study does not quantify all benefits derived from functioning healthy woodland and wetland habitat, nor does it include any other habitats that also deliver benefits. Therefore the economic value that all habitats can provide towards reducing health care costs and to the local economy is much greater than estimated.

3. Where do we want to be: Our Objectives

We have developed objectives for our Countryside Sites that outline our ambitions of what we want our Countryside sites to deliver. These objectives are directed by legislation and national policies for the Countryside and Biodiversity.

National Policy aims to secure bigger and better habitats that are better connected in order to provide a sustainable future for our ecosystems and the services they provide to our residents.

Guildford's Countryside sites are part of this network of habitats. Our management objectives aim to contribute to the regional and national biodiversity targets.

As landowner, Guildford Borough Council has an obligation to protect and safeguard the Special Protection Areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and registered Commons for future generations¹⁰.

Funding programmes are available in order to support the implementation of national biodiversity targets. The Countryside Team holds a Higher Level Stewardship agreement (2009 – 2019) with Natural England that funds work towards our objectives. The agreement prescribes targets and management prescriptions for each site that aim to achieve ecological improvements¹¹.

Our Objectives for Guildford's Countryside

- Guildford Borough Council provides an accessible, high quality and sustainable open space network, which ensures that the social, environmental and economic benefits of open spaces are enhanced for current and future generations of our community.
- Guildford Borough Council's Countryside sites contribute to the vision set out in the Governments' Natural Environment White Paper (The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature, 2011) to create better, bigger and more connected wildlife habitat networks.
- Habitats are enhanced in line with the landscape character and habitat types, in order to create a resilient ecological network.
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest are in favourable ecological condition.
- The River Wey and its catchment is a clean, valued and ecologically functioning river catchment area.
- GBC's Countryside Sites provide an outdoor recreation resource for sustainable and managed recreation activities outside the Thames Basin Heath SPA to ensure visitor pressure does not damage what we have.
- Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces reduce pressure on the Thames Basin Heath SPA without compromising nature conservation values of existing sites.
- Characteristic landscape features, archaeological areas and important views are enhanced and maintained in favourable condition.
- GBC's Countryside sites contribute to the provision of Eco System Services to benefit Guildford Borough's communities.
- Guildford Borough's Countryside sites are recognised as GBC owned green spaces and provide a safe and pleasant environment to visit.
- The management of GBC's Countryside engages the community by providing an educational resource and enabling and supporting volunteering.
- Guildford Borough Council plays an active role in working with partnerships towards achieving countryside management on a landscape scale.

4. Purpose of this document

This vision statement will provide a framework to enable proactive management of Guildford's Countryside and development of appropriate action plans for site management.

This vision covers the countryside sites that Guildford Borough Council manages. Works to implement this vision may cover additional areas in order to achieve landscape and habitat connectivity as well as provision for sustainable transport links. Similarly, there may be a need to control off-site influences that affect GBC's Countryside sites. However, this document does not represent or replace a strategy to improve and enhance the green infrastructure, landscape or biodiversity for the whole of GBC's administrative area.

We accept that achieving some aspects of the vision requires additional resources beyond the existing GBC Countryside Budget. This vision will enable a targeted process to establish partnerships and to secure external funds.

5. Vision statement

Guildford Borough Council aims to manage its Countryside estate to maintain and enhance its landscape, natural capital and ecological value to continue providing benefits for future generations.

We will work in Partnership with residents and organisations to improve sustainability and to protect our countryside, whilst balancing this with the needs of the rural and wider economy.

Guildford's natural environment and landscapes will form part of the overall provision of Surrey's ecosystem services, creating a coherent network, for people, recreation and wildlife, through supporting the implementation of traditional management.

6. Policies and Legislation

6.1 Legislation

- **The Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2008 – Section 40** places a duty on Local Authorities to have regard to conserving and enhancing biodiversity in carrying out their functions.
- **The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended)** protects animals, plants, and certain habitats in the UK.
- **The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000** regulates public rights of way, protects SSSIs and AONBs, and strengthens wildlife enforcement.
- **The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010** place a duty on public bodies to have regard to the EC Habitats Directive in carrying out their function, which includes the protection of 'European sites', and 'European protected species'.
- The **Commons Act 2006** regulates the management of registered common land.

The following legislation is relevant to site management activities:

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 - Those who create risk as a result of work activity are responsible for the protection of workers and members of the public from any consequences
- The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) - This requires employers to control exposure to hazardous substances to prevent ill health
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 - It is unlawful to discriminate against a disabled person
- Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 and 1984 - Sets out a duty of care to visitors – infrastructure must be 'safe'
- The Open Spaces Act 1906 - Defines open space and contains provisions for open spaces to be transferred to the Council's management

6.2 National policies

- **Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services:** This biodiversity strategy for England builds on the Natural Environment White Paper and sets out the strategic direction for national biodiversity policy to implement international and EU commitments.
- **The Natural Environment White Paper The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature** outlines the government's vision for the natural environment over the next 50 years.
- **National Character Areas:** NCA profiles are guidance documents for the delivery of Biodiversity 2020 to help communities to inform decision-making at a landscape scale
- **National ecosystems assessment**
The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA) was the first comprehensive analysis of the UK's natural environment. Published in 2011 it concluded that the natural world and its ecosystems are important to our well-being and economic prosperity. The UK National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on (UK NEAFO, 2014) provides new information and tools to help decision-makers understand the wider value of our ecosystems and the services they offer us.
- **Planning practice guidance**
The Planning Practice Guidance supports the delivery of the National Planning Policy Framework in England and includes sections on Natural Environment which include Landscape, Biodiversity and ecosystems, Green Infrastructure and Brownfield land, soils and agricultural land

6.3 Regional policies

- **Biodiversity Opportunity Areas: The Surrey Nature Partnership** developed the BOA documents as local documents to inform the delivery of Biodiversity 2020's aspiration for the creation and restoration of 200,000ha of priority habitat.
- **Naturally Richer: A Natural Capital Investment Strategy for Surrey** developed by the Surrey Nature Partnership sets out initial priorities and mechanisms to develop an Investment Plan for Surrey's natural capital
- **Surrey Wildlife Trust's Living Landscapes Strategy** has been developed to provide a strategy for Surrey to implement Biodiversity 2020 on a regional level
- **Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan:** Local authorities have a duty of regard to the AONB designation.
- **Blackwater Valley Countryside Strategy** is implemented by the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership to provide a unified approach towards a continuous green space along the Blackwater Valley.

- **River Wey Catchment Implementation Plan (CIP)** presents a prioritised programme of actions to achieve Good Ecological Status (GES) for the Wey catchment to meet the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive. The Surrey Wildlife Trust Living Landscape Partnership on behalf of the Environment Agency hosts the CIP.

6.4 Guildford Borough Council Policies:

Guildford Borough Council's Corporate Plan covers six fundamental themes that support our vision:

- Our Borough - ensuring that proportional and managed growth for future generations meets our community and economic needs.
- Our Economy - improving prosperity for all by enabling a dynamic, productive and sustainable economy that provides jobs and homes for local people.
- Our Infrastructure - working with partners to deliver the massive improvements needed in the next 20 years, including changes to tackle congestion issues.
- Our Environment - improving sustainability and protecting our countryside, balancing this with the needs of the rural and wider economy.
- Our Society - believing that every person matters and concentrating on the needs of the less advantaged.
- Your Council - ensuring a sustainable financial future to deliver improved and innovative services.

The Corporate Plan includes the following priorities:

- Work with partners to provide a high quality, diverse environment by ensuring sufficient and appropriate green, blue and open space and a resilient ecological network is maintained
- Support the River Wey Catchment Partnership to improve the water quality of the river and the management of its catchment.

Guildford Draft Local Plan

The emerging Guildford local plan includes a vision of delivering sustainable growth. This includes the ambition of protecting and enhancing the environment and balancing the needs of all residents and visitors with the desired outcome of improved overall wellbeing. This ambition is supported by the following objectives:

- To protect and enhance our heritage assets and improve the quality of our built and natural environment.
- To protect those areas designated as Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area, Special Areas of Conservation, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty for their biodiversity and landscape characteristics.
- To ensure that new development is designed and located to minimise its impact on the environment and that it mitigates, and is adapted for, climate change.

The Parks and Leisure Service will work towards these objectives in their Countryside site management and will seek developer contributions, such as CIL and S106, where appropriate.

Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Avoidance Strategy SPD

The SPA Strategy sets out how development will be mitigated in the borough by identifying where SANGs are available to provide “avoidance” of negative visitor impact to the SPA.

Rural Economic Strategy

The Council’s Rural Economic Strategy aims to develop sustainable rural communities and businesses. The strategy lists five policy priorities for the rural economy including:

- Priority 3: Landscape Management and Countryside Vision
- Priority 4: Green Space Health and Wellbeing for better Quality of Life

6.5 Local Partnerships and Initiatives

- **Surrey Nature Partnership** is a statutory body formally recognised by central government. It is a key part of delivering the objectives of the Natural Environment White Paper linking business, nature and the economy in Surrey. Local Nature Partnerships (LNP) share equal status with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) and both have a duty to work together.¹²
- The **Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Project** monitors visitor numbers and bird species for the Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area and provides a rangers service as part of the mitigation measures to protect the Thames Basin Heaths from the impacts of new residential development. Natural England hosts the project.
- The **Wey Landscape Partnership** is administered by the Surrey Wildlife Trust and aims to improve our local waters in the Wey Catchment and achieve environmental goals under the European Water Framework Directive and Local Development Frameworks
- **The Surrey Countryside and Rural Enterprise Forum (SCREF)** was established to provide opportunities in delivering key improvements and to develop a shared vision for countryside and rural initiatives in Surrey.
- The **Surrey Heathland Partnership** contract manages works on the Thames Basin Heaths on behalf of local authorities and other partners and provides a contact for the local communities.
- The **Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership** carries out works in the Blackwater Valley on behalf of the local authorities that border the Valley, including wildlife conservation and access improvements.

- The **Basingstoke Canal Partnership** is set up to manage the Basingstoke Canal SSSI for the benefit of Canal users and the wider community.
- The **Surrey Hills AONB** (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) **Enterprises** aims to promote the Surrey Hills, as a national asset for the benefit of local businesses, in order to enhance our community and conserve our unique heritage.
- **West Surrey Woodlands Project** is an initiative of the Surrey Hills Enterprises that aims to develop partnership work between woodland managers to improve economically viable woodland management for biodiversity and recreation, promote public support for woodland operations and develop community engagement.
- **Chilworth Together** are a group of Chilworth residents who aim to preserve, protect and enhance Chilworth village, the surrounding countryside and the unique heritage, especially the historic Gunpowder Mills.
- **Local Volunteer Groups** manage the Local Natures Reserves at Fox Corner and Snakey Lane on behalf of Guildford Borough Council. In addition, the Guildford Borough Council Countryside team works with Volunteer Groups at Pewley Downs, Chilworth Gunpowder Mills, Riverside Nature Reserve and Heathfield Nature Reserve.
- **Swingbridge** boats are run by the Surrey Care Trust to increase skills in young people through volunteering. Groups work on sites adjacent to the River Wey.

7. Issues (opportunities and challenges)

The following list identifies a number of factors and current trends that influence GBC's Countryside sites. GBC's Countryside Team will need to manage these influences in order to achieve the vision and objectives for the Countryside sites. Policies to manage these factors on specific habitats are detailed in section 8.

- **Legislation:** The site management objectives and operations are required to comply with current legislation.
- **Eco System Services and Green Infrastructure:** Countryside site management should maximise the benefits that GBC's Countryside sites can deliver for society and economy, for example flood alleviation, health benefits, wood fuel etc.
- **Social and economic costs:** Lack of investment in the provision of a healthy environment and well-kept accessible green spaces increases costs to public services, including health care and anti-social behaviour. A healthy environment is recognised to provide a positive contribution to local economic development.
- **Biodiversity loss and climate change:** Local Authorities have a role in halting biodiversity loss and ensure that habitats are resilient enough to adjust to climate change.
- **Visitor pressure:** Increasing visitor numbers, including dog walkers, is the biggest factor that influences the development of the Countryside sites. Site layout and provision of infrastructure need to consider current and future visitor management.
- **Inappropriate site uses:** Site management is influenced by the actions of site users, which requires both re-active and active approaches to ensure the sites deliver their intended functions and reduce antisocial behaviour and trespass.
- **Dog fouling and litter:** Impact on visitor experiences and on wildlife.
- **Conflicting uses:** Visitor management needs to address areas where site users impact on each other.
- **Developing usage trends:** Trends, such as the increase in visits to the Countryside for health reasons in the past five years, should be considered in the site management.
- **Car Parking and access to properties:** Car parking is becoming a significant issue in line with the increase in site visitors.
- **Shifting baseline syndrome:** Public perception of a healthy natural environment has significantly changed over the past decades. As a result, residents are less aware of biodiversity loss, and live and work in a poorer environment than our predecessors.
- **Habitat succession:** Left unmanaged habitats will change over time, usually through scrub development, resulting in biodiversity loss.

- Tree diseases: Tree stock management will need to take into account potential outbreak of diseases such as Ash die back or occurrence of pest species like Oak Processionary Moth.
- Non-native invasive species: Non-native species cause damage to natural habitats and control of some species is subject to legislation.
- Hydrology: On site drainage and water levels influence site management and access.
- Flood alleviation: Water meadows, Fen and Reed bed habitats can be used to store floodwater, which would also provide benefits for biodiversity.
- Biodiversity off-setting and mitigation: New schemes can influence habitat connectivity.
- Funding: There are limitations on existing budgets but also opportunities to secure external funding and partnership working.
- Neighbourhood Plans: Emerging local Neighbourhood Plans should fully consider the natural environment without resisting positive change in site management.

8. Habitat Policies:

We have grouped Guildford's Countryside sites into the following habitat categories that will allow application of the same management policies to sites that experience similar issues and require similar management. Detailed policies are outlined in the following sections.

- a) Heathland
- b) Wey Valley Meadows
- c) Woodland
- d) Downland
- e) Open Commons
- f) Mixed Urban Fringe Habitat
- g) Conservation Road Verges

In developing the objectives in this Vision Guildford Borough Council aims to manage the Countryside sites in line with national and regional policies and guidance (Section 6) and obligations for the management of Special Protection Areas (SPA)¹³, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and registered Common Land (Appendix 1).

a. Heathland

Habitat resource

Lowland Heathland is an internationally rare and declining habitat. Bullswater and Pirbright Commons are designated as SSSI and afforded protection within the Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (SPA), although the other Heathland sites also add to the SPA habitat network.

Habitats are dominated by *Calluna* heathland, small areas of sphagnum mosses and acid grassland that supports protected heathland bird species including the woodlark, nightjar and Dartford warbler. A colony of protected Silver Studded Blue butterflies, a species of principle importance under the NERC Act, is present at Dawney Hill. Areas of pine and birch have established, out-competing the heather communities. There are large areas of gorse that both provide habitat for heathland birds as well competing with the lower heather shrubs.

Sites: Bullswater Common, Pirbright Common, Chapel Lane, Dawney Hill, The Gardens, West Heath

Issues

- Habitat decline from lack of management and developing woodland
- Sites provide habitat for ground nesting birds and are sensitive to visitor pressure
- Lack of public understanding and public opposition to heathland restoration
- Fire risk
- Flood risk

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. Heathland SSSIs are in favourable condition, and other heathland sites fulfil favourable SSSI criteria
2. The heathland habitat is suitable for SPA bird species nightjar, wood lark and Dartford warbler
3. The heathland habitat supports silver studded blue and other specialist species
4. The heathlands fulfil a flood retention role
5. Heathland management utilises the opportunities of the wood fuel market
6. Members of the public understand the role of heathland as habitat resource, their sensitivity to disturbance and the need for management

Heathland Policies:

- We will restore and increase areas of open heathland for the benefit of the SPA bird species and heathland priority species
- We will prevent further woodland development on existing open heathland
- We will protect heathland sites from inappropriate uses that may cause damage to the integrity of the habitat
- We will maintain low key public access to our heathlands without encouraging increases in visitor numbers

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Implement the heathland restoration work in accordance with GBC's Higher Level Stewardship Agreement
2. Prevent scrub development on open heathland habitat
3. Maintain the Partnership with the Surrey Heathlands Project and Thames Basin Heath Project to improve, extend and connect habitat and manage visitors
4. Work with Natural England's Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) project to provide a warden scheme on our SPA sites.
5. Use conservation grazing as the main heathland management tool
6. Use wood fuel opportunities to manage heathlands efficiently
7. Keep residents informed of major site works through education and interpretation
8. Maintain public rights of way and permissive access routes
9. Implement fire prevention plans for heathland sites

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Surrey Heathland Project, Forestry Commission, Natural England, Pirbright Parish Council, Pirbright Flood Forum, GBC Planning Policy Team

b. Wey Valley Meadows

Habitat resource

The River Wey floodplain widens when entering Guildford Borough, which has led to the establishment of wet meadow areas with naturally high ground water. Shalford Water Meadows is designated as SSSI. Reed beds and fen habitat are present as well as small areas of wet woodland. These habitats are important for wading birds such as lapwings (red list of conserving concern), reed bed bird species and owls as well as bats. All bats are European protected species. In combination with adjacent sites, the Wey Valley Meadows can potentially provide habitat for the priority species otter and water vole. Riverside Nature Reserve is an important stronghold for harvest mice.

Sites: Shalford Water Meadows, Woodbridge Meadows, Parsonage Water Meadows, Stoke Water Meadows, Riverside Nature Reserve, Burpham Court Farm, Weylea Farm

Issues

- Visitor pressure on habitat and ground nesting birds
- The need for SANG provision in the Wey Valley
- Management implications due to wetness of the sites
- Scrub development and natural succession changes the habitat and site character
- Invasive species
- Fishing
- Flooding preventing access
- Low water levels lead to drying out of fen habitat

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. Shalford Water Meadow SSSI is in favourable condition, and other wetland sites fulfil favourable SSSI criteria
2. The river and riparian habitat are in good ecological status as defined by the Water Framework Directive
3. Wetland bird species (e.g. lapwing, reed warbler) breed in the Wey Valley Meadows
4. The regionally important Harvest Mouse population at Riverside LNR and Burpham Court Farm is healthy and stable
5. The Wey Valley Meadows fulfil a flood alleviation role
6. The Wey Valley landscape character is maintained
7. Riverside Nature Reserve and Burpham Court Farm are regionally recognised flagship sites
8. People are aware of the significance of the Wey Valley Meadows and role they play in ecological and cultural landscape

Wey Valley Meadow Policies:

- We will maintain areas of open fen for the benefit of wetland priority species
- We will promote the existing SANG sites, access to them and the awareness of their importance as natural habitat. In order to achieve this we will manage public access to prevent deterioration of wetland habitat and protect associated priority species whilst improving access routes in less sensitive areas.
- We will protect our Wey Valley Meadow sites from inappropriate uses. Inappropriate uses differ from site to site with particular strong limitations at Shalford Watermeadows SSSI. We may introduce bye laws that will support this policy.
- We will maintain and where appropriate enhance the Wey Valley Meadows ability to function as flood storage areas

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Implement of the maintenance work specified in the Higher Level Stewardship Agreement
2. Carry out conservation grazing as main site maintenance tool
3. Establish conservation zones at Riverside Nature Reserve
4. Maintain openness of the wet meadows through tree and scrub management
5. Maintain public rights of way and permissive access routes
6. Manage water levels for positive ecological management and where necessary create new ditches and sluices
7. Eradicate invasive species
8. Work with Natural England, Environment Agency and GBC Strategic Planning to develop the SANG sites Riverside, Parsonage and Burpham Court Farm
9. Work with the Wey Valley Partnership towards implementation of the Wey Valley Catchment Plan, including fish passes
10. Work with the Environment Agency towards implementation of Water Framework Directive¹⁴ targets
11. Work with partners to implement a surface water management plan that ensures the water quality in rivers and wetland habitats is improved.

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Natural England, Environment Agency, Wey Landscape Partnership, Strategic Planning Team, Engineer Team, Surrey Flood Risk Partnership

c. Woodland

Habitat resource

Approximatively 380ha of GBC's Countryside land is woodland. Chantry Woods and Merrow Downs represent the largest woodland areas comprising a mix of hazel coppice, conifer plantations, and mixed deciduous woodland. Areas of Ancient Semi Natural Woodlands are present, the largest one in Thornycroft Wood. Shalford and Peasmarsh Commons and Chilworth Gunpowder Mills represent areas of wet woodland.

Sites: Chantry Wood, Merrow Downs Wood, Thornycroft Wood, Short Wood, Merrow Common Wood, Peasmarsh, The Mount (Henley Wood), Westborough Woods, Chilworth Gunpowder Mills, Newbridge Common, Moore Close, Speedwell Close (Merrow Common), Weybrook, Jubilee Wood

Woodland Areas of: Effingham Common, Shalford Common, Gosden Common, Compton Common, Lakeside LNR, Tytings Farm (SANG)

Issues

- Lack of management
- Lack of habitat variety, monoculture
- Development of wood fuel market in Surrey
- Public opposition to woodland management works
- Inappropriate uses
- Scheduled Ancient Monument at Chilworth Gunpowder Mills
- Tree diseases (Ash die back)
- Oak Processionary Moth
- Invasive species within wet woodland
- Flooding within wet woodland
- Tree fall from heavy wind

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. Woodlands are sustainably managed for both timber and habitat resource in line with the UK Forestry Standard
2. Chantry Woods functions effectively as SANG site
3. Woodland habitat contains a diverse range of habitat within the canopy, shrub and ground layers
4. Tree shelterbelts are maintained to complement the adjacent habitats
5. Ancient and Semi ancient woodland is protected and in good ecological condition
6. Dormice populations are healthy and stable (Chilworth Gunpowder Mills, Merrow Downs)
7. Public have an understanding of woodland as habitat resource and the need for management
8. The landscape character of the Surrey Hills AONB is preserved and views are maintained
9. Chilworth Gunpowder Mills is a flagship site in the Tillingbourne Valley

Woodland Policies:

- We will maintain woodland habitat for protected and priority species, including bats and dormice. Where appropriate we will carry out forestry operations to improve biodiversity in our woodlands
- We will manage public access to prevent conflict of uses through designation of walking, riding and cycling areas
- We will protect ancient and ancient semi natural woodland from inappropriate uses and inappropriate management
- We will maintain access to the Heritage Features at Chilworth Gunpowder Mills whilst at the same time improve the natural habitat

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Carry out woodland maintenance operations to develop understorey layers and to protect and improve ancient semi natural woodland.
2. Work with partner organisations to utilise the wood fuel market for woodland management
3. Create partnerships to enable sustainable coppice management
4. Raise awareness of management activities
5. Remove non-native invasive species
6. Manage woodlands in accordance with SAM Management Plan at Chilworth Gunpowder Mills and enhance interpretation of SAM features
7. Manage woodland access for recreation and management operations
8. Work in partnership with the Forestry Commission to achieve UK Forestry Standard
9. Work in Partnership with Surrey Hills AONB towards implementation of the AONB management plan and to co-ordinate recreational uses
10. Maintain public rights of way and permissive access routes
11. Carry out ditch maintenance to avoid flooding and manage habitats

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Natural England, Forestry Commission, AONB Office

d. Downland

Habitat resource

Downland is formed of the Chalk grassland areas of the North Downs with adjacent hedgerows and scrub areas. Chalk grassland habitat developed through sheep grazing on thin, free draining and nutrient poor soil. It is one of the most diverse wildlife habitats in Western Europe with up to 60 species per square metre. Many of the species that occur on chalk grassland are specialists that struggle to live in other habitats, including a variety of nationally rare and protected orchids. The rare and protected Small Blue butterfly and the Grizzled Skipper, both priority species under the NERC Act, occur at Pewley Downs together with another 24 species of butterfly.

It is estimated that up to 80% of chalk grassland habitat has been lost in the last century through development, change in land use and recreational pressure.

The fields at Chantry Woods, although on acidic soil, also form part of the rolling Downlands Landscape.

Sites: Pewley Downs, The Mount, Merrow Downs, Chantry Wood Fields (Acid Grassland), Tytings Farm

Issues

- Habitat decline from lack of management, nutrient enrichment and natural succession
- Habitat is sensitive to visitor pressure

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. Downland sites are in favourable condition with typical species present
2. The views and openness of the Downland landscape is maintained
3. Members of the public understand the importance and national context of Downlands habitat in the North Downs.

Downland Policies:

- We will maintain areas of open Downland for the benefit of chalk grassland priority species, including orchid and butterfly species
- We will manage public access to prevent deterioration of habitat and protect associated priority species

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Implement of the maintenance work specified in the Higher Level Stewardship Agreement
2. Maintain appropriate levels of scrub cover to maintain the grassland character of Downland sites and where necessary carry out works to restore grassland areas
3. Carry out conservation grazing as main site maintenance tool
4. Maintain views and openness of the Downland landscape
5. Manage sites to minimise impact on ground nesting birds
6. Maintain public rights of way and permissive access routes
7. Work with the Merrow Downs Golf Course to ensure sustainable Downland Management
8. Work with partners to implement landscape scale projects to target priority species

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Natural England, Guildford Golf Club, Butterfly Conservation, Pewley Down Volunteers

e. Open Commons

Habitat resource

Guildford owns several areas of Common Land that represent a mixed open habitat, usually heavily used and containing a variety of features ranging from long grass, scrub areas and ponds to amenity areas such as cricket and football fields. Most Commons include clearly defined woodland areas managed as woodland.

Sites: Effingham Common, Shalford Common, Compton Common, Peasmarsh Common (Shalford Common), St Catherine's Common (Shalford Common), Merrow Common (Kingfisher Drive)

Issues

- Common Legislation influences management operations and site uses
- Encroachments
- User conflicts, including horse riding
- Public events and sports facilities
- Perceived lack of management
- Habitat succession
- Invasive species
- Flooding
- Antisocial behaviour
- Fishing

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. The landscape character of our Common Land is enhanced
2. The natural habitat of the Commons is maintained and improving
3. Encroachment on Common Land is contained
4. The Commons provide a space for sustainable community uses, including fishing, sport, horse riding, walking
5. The open areas are free from inappropriate scrub development
6. Historic features are maintained and preserved

Policies:

- We will maintain character of open common land whilst improving meadow and road verge habitats
- We will enable public events and recreational activities that conform to Common Land legislation
- We will manage public access to prevent conflict of uses through designation of walking, riding and cycling areas
- We will protect habitat for priority species and where necessary put measures in place to manage visitors
- We will protect Common Land from illegal encroachment

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Implement management regimes that increase biodiversity and residents satisfaction
2. Communicate site management policies to stakeholders
3. Enable suitable community use of common land to raise income and discourage inappropriate behaviour. This includes, for example, public fairs, health activities and fishing.
4. Manage conflicting sites uses
5. Carry out management activities within legislative framework of Common Land
6. Maintain public rights of way and permissive access routes
7. Maintain network of ditches for drainage and habitat

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Parish Councils, Commoners, Open Space Society

f. Mixed Urban Fringe Habitat

Habitat resource

The mixed urban fringe habitat is represented by a number of sites that contain various small habitat types, and could be described as less formal local parks. Site features are ponds, meadows, scrub fringes and trees. Usually the site's amenity and wildlife value is this mix of features present.

Sites: Lakeside, Hollybush, Shaw Fields, Rowan Field, Abbotswood Paddock, Fox Corner Nature Reserve, Heathfield Nature Reserve, Snakey Lane Nature Reserve, The Villages Community Wildlife Area, Send Hill, Onslow Arboretum, Tongham Railway

Issues

- Fly tipping
- Inappropriate site uses
- Fishing
- Access to grazing sites
- Landscape Character Identity in the Blackwater Valley
- Flooding
- Invasive species
- Perceived lack of management
- Habitat succession
- Encroachment

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. The urban fringe habitat is preserved and improved
2. Lakeside Nature Reserve is a flagship site for residents in Ash
3. Local Volunteer and Community Groups are enabled to manage the Nature Reserves at Heathfield, Fox Corner and Snakey Lane

Urban Fringe Habitat Policies:

- We will maintain habitat diversity for protected and priority species.
- We will enable public events and recreational activities that do not conflict with other uses and protection of biodiversity
- We will support Local Volunteer Groups in the development of site management plans at Heathfield, Fox Corner and Snakey Lane LNRs in order to enable appropriate management

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Maintain the Partnership with the Blackwater Valley Partnership and Basingstoke Canal Authority to improve, extend and connect habitat and manage visitors
2. Support Local Groups in dealing with issues such as site safety, invasive species and tree management
3. Work in partnership with local Volunteer Groups at Heathfield, Fox Corner and Snaky Lane LNRs
4. Manage fishing licences
5. Use conservation grazing as management tool where appropriate
6. Enable and support local events at Lakeside Nature Reserve

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Local Volunteer Groups, Surrey Wildlife Trust, Blackwater Valley Partnership, Basingstoke Canal Authority, Natural England, Parish Councils

g. Conservation Road Verges

Habitat resource

Surrey County Council carried out a conservation verge mapping exercise that identified road verges with appropriate soils and sufficient existing seed banks that are large enough to support the local ecological network. Although affected by the impact of traffic, road verges rarely experience other disturbance. Roadside ditches provide habitat for the common toad and other amphibians. Guildford Borough Council manages approximately 32km of road verges as rural verges on behalf of Surrey County Council. These rural verges receive two cuts per annum and allow the vegetation to grow between cutting times. Most of these verges are part of our Countryside Sites.

Sites: A246 East Horsley to Merrow, A31- Hogsback – chalk grassland areas, A248 and A281 (Shalford Common), A25 (Stoke Park), The Mount

Issues

- Litter
- Fly tipping
- Erosion of verge by car parking
- Site access
- Sight lines
- Inappropriate cutting regime or planting
- Flooding and ditch clearance
- Invasive species
- Perceived lack of management
- Habitat succession
- Contractor performance

Objectives: Where do we want to be?

1. The habitat on the conservation road verges is preserved and improved
2. The establishment of conservation verges is supported by residents and road users

Conservation Verge Policies:

- We will maintain conservation road verges to provide habitat diversity
- We will maximise opportunities to establish conservation verges where appropriate
- We will manage our conservation road verges without compromising road safety requirements

Actions: How do we get there?

1. Identify and map conservation verges
2. Implement the conservation verge management through the Highways maintenance contract.
3. Work with partners such as the Surrey Biodiversity Partnership to identify new habitat creation opportunities, best practice for implementation and monitoring

Stakeholders: Who is involved?

Local residents, Highway Authority, Parish Councils, Surrey Biodiversity Partnership

9. Further Action/ Next steps

The table below outlines the major steps over the next three years towards implementing the Vision in this document. The implementation of the actions below will create the conditions to further review and improve the management of Guildford Borough Council's Countryside. This section will be reviewed in 2020.

#	Action	Responsible Officer	Target date
	<p>We will develop management plans for priority GBC Countryside sites (see Appendix 1) to implement the objectives of this vision statement taking into account the features presents on each site and external influences of their condition.</p> <p>The site management plans will detail the works necessary to fulfil GBC's statutory obligations, external agreements and to enhance the wider ecological network. This may include projects for which additional funding will need to be secured.</p>	Countryside Manager	2019
	<p>We will implement positive management on all our sites: Positive management (as defined in DEFRA's guidance for implementing the biodiversity duty and the Single data set 160-00)^{15,16} means active management to maintain or improve the ecological value of the site. Priority sites for implementation are the designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Sites of Nature Conservation Importance and SANGs.</p>	Countryside Manager	2020
	<p>We will develop existing and new SANG sites with the aim to enhance the Borough's ecological network: This will include the development of spending plans to ensure sound financial management. Priority SANG sites are Effingham Common (Access , drainage and biodiversity improvements and Common Land permissions), Parsonage Watermeadows (Access creation), Tyting Farm (Masterplan), Burpham Court Farm (Masterplan)</p>	SANGs Officer	2020
	<p>We will develop a Woodland Strategy with the Forestry Commission: The woodland strategy will support the objectives of this vision statement to agree a woodland management programme on a landscape scale.</p>	Tree and Woodlands Officer	2018
	<p>Signage of sites: We will install corporate signage at site entrances to make the site recognisable as GBC Countryside site and provide adequate access points to sites.</p>	Countryside Manager	2019
	<p>Education/interpretation/events: We will improve interpretation to flagship countryside sites and encourage public events that improve understanding of the role the sites play to maintain a sustainable natural resource for our residents.</p>	Countryside Manager	2019
	<p>Partnerships and volunteers: We will work with others to develop partnerships to ensure GBCs site will link into a landscape scale site management approach for the benefit of nature conservation. See Section 5.4</p>	Countryside Manager	2020

10. Resources

The Countryside team are a Countryside Manager, 1 Senior Countryside Warden, 3 Countryside Wardens, 1 Tree and Woodlands Officer, 1 Tree Inspector and 1 SANG Officer.

The resource requirements for implementation of this vision will be largely covered by the Countryside Section's core budget. Specific projects and infrastructure repairs may require additional funding, for example through the Community Infrastructure Levy or Guildford Borough Council's Capital Programme.

The Countryside Team holds a Higher Level Stewardship agreement with Natural England that covers the period from 1/3/2009 until 28/2/2019. This agreement provides additional funding to carry out specific works for the improvement of natural habitats.

The development of sites as Suitable Alternative Green Space (SANG) is supported through the collection of a SANG tariff for development within the zone of influence of the Thames Basin Heath SPA. The zone of influence and tariff are outlined in the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Avoidance Strategy SPD.

Further opportunities to fund habitat enhancement work may arise from the New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMs), Biodiversity offsetting, landfill tax funds and the Community Infrastructure Levy.

11. Appendices:

Appendix 1: List of Sites and designations

Appendix 2: Site Map

Appendix 3: Policy and Guidance Documents

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