

How Nature and Biodiversity Is Supported in Huntingdonshire



The Importance of Protecting Nature

Protecting and preserving nature and biodiversity has become a more salient issue in the minds of people all across the country, with 45% stating that green spaces have played a vital, positive impact in protecting their mental health and wellbeing during the Covid19 pandemic (Mental Health Foundation, 2021).

After a year of being at home, individuals have become more aware of the importance of access to local green and blue spaces. Studies have also suggested that this new awareness will lead to increased public support of future policy surrounding and aiming at more resilient and sustainable living environments (Rousseau, 2020).

Having access to good quality green space has been vital to our residents in this past year, with one Huntingdon resident reaching out to us to say:

“Lockdown actually showed me how essential green spaces are for my mental health... I discovered that even a couple of days of not getting outdoors and near some grass, trees and plants led to a massive decline in my mood. Just one walk in nature helped me not just survive, but even thrive...”

It is clear that accessibility to nature and open spaces is crucial in supporting the wellbeing of our residents, which is why Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) has been actively taking steps to protect the nature and biodiversity we have in our District and continue to form actions and plans to build on this work.

An Overview of the District

- 1,534 hectares of Green Space
- 87m² of Green Space per Resident, more than double the national average
- 14,872m² (equivalent to the size of two football pitches) of meadow seed planted in 2021 to support Wildlife across our network of parks and open spaces
- Large network of watercourses maintained to support local habitats
- HDC own and manage approximately 42.8 Ha of woodlands which is comprised of “Woodland”, “Pocket Woodland” and “Shelterbelts”
- HDC currently manages over 9000 individual trees, tree groups, shelterbelts, and woodland within the District - it has been estimated that the tree canopy managed by HDC covers 400Ha of the district (equivalent to five and a half Wembley Stadiums)

Corporate Plan

Huntingdonshire has a strong record of protecting and maintaining a broad spectrum of open spaces, waterways, and countryside, all of which contributes to the quality of the natural environment across the district. HDC have committed to the principles and the aspirations of Doubling Nature across the district in its Corporate Plan, to protect the natural environment and in turn create a space where our residents wellbeing thrives.

Our Corporate Plan commits to protecting nature and the biodiversity in several ways...

People: Supporting people to improve their health and well-being

- Provide great, accessible green spaces, countryside leisure and cultural facilities and opportunities for recreation and health
- Ensuring new developments have sufficient public green open spaces
- Prioritising accessible, high quality, well maintained open space
- Facilitating and providing opportunities for positive activities that support residents' health and wellbeing needs
- Adopt a plan and deliver increases in nature, protecting and increasing biodiversity within our parks and open spaces

What have we already achieved?

Awards

- HDC currently holds three prestigious Green Flag Awards at Priory Park (St Neots), Hinchingsbrooke Country Park (HCP) and Paxton Pits Nature Reserve. This award recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.
- 2020 Bees Needs Winner for Priory Park and HCP, recognising these parks as a haven for Bees and other pollinators due to success of our pictorial meadow planting
- 2021 Keep Britain Tidy **Love Parks** Network Award Winner recognising the actions HDC had taken to protect our parks and open spaces during the Covid19 pandemic, including increasing litter bin capacity and improving accessibility

Healthy Open Spaces Strategy

- Adopted in October 2020 our Healthy Open Spaces Strategy lays out the importance of good quality parks and open spaces and how to maximise the health benefits of the Council's Parks and Open Spaces
- 58% of residents spoken to during the stakeholder consultation period, stated that wildlife and nature was the most important aspect of parks and open spaces, cementing that wildlife and nature is at the forefront of our residents minds and we need to work to protect that
- Approximately 100m² of wildflower seed given out to residents to help create biodiverse spaces at home
- 10-year action plan includes community led approach to help educate residents on the importance nature has on wellbeing and build communities around this

Trees

- Tree Strategy adopted in 2020 which contains updated policies relating to all aspects of Local Authority tree management, and incorporates national issues such as biosecurity, canopy cover management, and subsidence
- The Tree Strategy leads on the premise that trees and woodland areas play an important part in protecting the natural environment, by cleaning the air we breathe, providing habitats for plants and animal species and creating an attractive environment for people to live in
- Ensures a minimum of 2:1 ratio for tree replacement
- During winter 2020/21 HDC planted around 1500 new trees at Hinchingsbrooke Country Park and Priory Park, St Neots to both enhance the tree canopy and support nature
- Implementation of a robust Tree Management Programme: to include the adoption of a computerised tree inspection and management system to programme tree surveys and public tree works both proactively and reactively.
- As of January 2020, HDC currently administer 858 Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs); this equates to approximately 10,000 individual trees and 3000Ha of protected woodland, groups, and areas of trees

- Work in partnership with Development Management and the Huntingdonshire Local Plan to ensure that new developments protect existing trees and natural features whilst also providing new opportunities for tree planting

Development Management

- Adopted May 2019, Huntingdonshire’s Local Plan identifies several Green Infrastructure Priority Areas, the policy also sets out HDC’s approach to protecting and enhancing Huntingdonshire’s green infrastructure for the benefit of biodiversity and residents for recreation and leisure
- Green infrastructure serves to balance built development - it facilitates opportunities for people to access open space and provides habitats for wildlife. Improving the ecological, visual, heritage and recreational value of the countryside brings environmental, social and health benefits
- Proposals for facilities associated with strategic green infrastructure that, by their nature, need to be in the countryside will be supported subject to their compatibility with the green infrastructure where adverse effects are avoided

Implementation and Monitoring	
Responsible agencies	Huntingdonshire District Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, town and parish councils, environmental protection agencies, landowners, developers
Delivery mechanism	Through the determination of planning applications, SPDs, Neighbourhood Plans
Timescale	Throughout the plan period
Monitoring indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losses to biodiversity habitat • Additions to biodiversity habitat • Total change in biodiversity habitat

Championing Biodiversity

- Beehive area in Hinchingsbrooke Country Park expanded and made wheelchair friendly, with new interpretation which helps educate park users on the importance of protecting bees
- Hosting community litter picks and having equipment available in parks for ad-hoc litter picks to help preserve the quality of our green spaces, keep them, and increase community involvement with nature and the outdoors
- Venue for three Forest Schools at Priory Park, Hill Rise Park, and HCP, including Fireflies who meet at least once a week
- The new Berman Park in St Ives, a key action in the Corporate Plan achieved in 2021, provides a home for nature and biodiversity, including areas of wildflower, trees and seasonal wetland, this area connects to existing Countryside managed woodland known as the Thicket and will create a Green Corridor for local wildlife

- Annual wildlife reports for Holt Island and Paxton Pits, recently showing increased sightings of otters at Paxton Pits indicating that the habitat is favorable and being managed well
- Increasing popularity of sponsored nest box at Holt Island, managed by Friends group to increase funding and awareness
- Monitoring of wildlife through use of cameras – Holt Island badger and fox footage
- The Dragonfly Society named Paxton Pits a Dragonfly Hotspot after 26 species of Dragonfly and Damselfly, nearly half of all species known in the UK, were recorded in Dragonfly Week 2020

Live Projects

- Priory Park, St Neots – grant application to clear pond -we will have different levels within the pond to attract different pond species (plants and wildlife). To enhance the habitat within the park by encouraging wildlife and benefiting the knowledge of local children.
- Parklets Project – providing themed green spaces in town centres, encouraging wildlife, and including local native planting. The community engagement process has highlighted how important nature is to the public with comments such as, adding in mini herb community planters around the parklets, a nature/wildlife themed design and a popular comment of how planting was the most liked feature of the parklet. By carrying out the pilot, we will be able to see whether incorporating nature into the project's design will be a success or not.
- Launch of GoJauntly, an app with the aim of getting users actively involved in nature, including a 'Nature Notes' feature which encourages users to engage with and appreciate their surroundings
- Rolling programme to try and eradicate invasive species such as Turkey Oak and Sycamore regrowth while leaving as much standing deadwood as possible for the benefit of wildlife where it is safe to do so
- Paxton Pits Nature Reserve have an area set aside for bark chippings from HDC Arboriculture Team, this is used for paths, new tree, and hedgerow planting - it is also signposted on site to allow people to help themselves in return for a donation to our Friends group
- St Neots Riverside dredging, a partnership with the Environment Agency and St Neots Angling Society, working to support and protect fish stock and habitats
- Fish pass at Godmanchester - part of an ecological project to improve fish and eel migration along the Great Ouse

- Improving habitat at Paxton Pits Nature Reserve for nightingales after a few years of (national) decline

In the Future

Priory Park Pond Dipping Platform	We hope to build a pond dipping platform that will encourage a wealth of wildlife and insects on the site, while also creating a community asset where residents can learn about the benefits of nature
Priory Park Bee Poles	Building off the success of Priory Parks Bees Needs Award we hope to install Bee Posts to provide a hope for solitary bees and other pollinators
Memory Trees in all parks	An initiative to provide a forum to share memories and experiences
Learn from Museum After Dark Event	Identify appropriate events and activities in appropriate sites that enable people to safely experience parks after dark
Work in Partnership with Woodland Trust	Work in partnership with the Woodland Trust and support the aspirations of the District Council's Tree Strategy through an annual big tree plant event
Parks Passport	Encourage people to visit more of our parks and open spaces. Create a passport app, where families can collect a virtual stamp for each site they visit, creating a relationship between families and nature
Adopt an open space	Establish a scheme for local groups, organisations and businesses to adopt a space. Adopters can support the space through financial or in kind contributions such as volunteering, promotion, education programmes or supporting projects within the site.

Protect and maintain trees across our network of parks and open spaces	Use the HDC Tree Strategy to shape the approach across in parks and open space
Over £2million investment in Nature	An excess of £2m already assigned for more improvements to our parks and open spaces in the next 2 years
Bringing nature back to verges	Pilot of a new management method for roadside verges that promote biodiversity and nature with the aim to roll out wider based on the learning in 2022/23

References

Mental Health Foundation, Rowland, M., 2021. *Why Nature is the theme for Mental Health Awareness Week 2021*. [online] Mental Health Foundation. Available at: <<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week/why-nature>> [Accessed 12 May 2021].

Rousseau, S., Deschacht, N. Public Awareness of Nature and the Environment During the COVID-19 Crisis. *Environ Resource Econ* 76, 1149–1159 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10640-020-00445-w>

Huntingdonshire District Council Tree Strategy:

<https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/media/5069/huntingdonshire-tree-strategy-2020-2030.pdf>

Huntingdonshire District Council Healthy Open Spaces Strategy:

<https://applications.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s111005/Appendix%20%20-%20HDC%20Healthy%20Open%20Spaces%20Strategy%20and%2010%20Year%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

Huntingdonshire District Council Corporate Plan:

<https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/media/1390/corporate-plan.pdf>

Huntingdonshire District Council Local Plan:

<https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/media/3872/190516-final-adopted-local-plan-to-2036.pdf>