

Cabinet Member of the Month

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PORTFOLIO: Environment

LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGIES

Surrey is rich in wildlife and natural beauty, but we know that this is under threat from a variety of local pressures and climate change. I am therefore very excited about the Council's new responsibility under the Environment Act to lead on developing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the work ahead of us through this strategy to establish priorities for nature and map these across the county, through a collaborative and evidence-based process over the next 12 months. The strategy aims to make spaces for nature bigger, better and more joined up. This is critical to both halting the loss of biodiversity and declines in species abundance. It will also benefit people in communities across Surrey by creating greener communities and ecological networks that are more resilient to droughts and floods.

This is a significant opportunity, with Biodiversity Net Gain in planning and the transition to the new farming outcome-based incentive payment schemes known as ELMs (Environmental Land Management Schemes), being the key funding and delivery mechanisms for the strategy.

Each Local Nature Recovery Strategy will join up with neighbouring areas and as such, will form a key strand of the Nature Recovery Network across England. The LNRS will also be detailed enough to help inform proposals and decisions of individual landowners and farmers, developers, and regulators including Local Planning Authorities. The Council will work closely with the Surrey Nature Partnership, with the health sector and with infrastructure partners from highways to flood management, so investment opportunities across the spectrum are joined up.

LAND MANAGEMENT & NATURE RECOVERY

The Natural Capital team has been working with partners on projects to support biodiversity across the Council's land holdings. These have included pilot projects which explore the potential to deliver Council outcomes if a broader approach is taken to how outcomes can be achieved.

Expanding the land protected by conservation designations

The Council have been working with Natural England to explore designating a new Super National Nature Reserve in West Surrey to protect Surrey's extended areas of heathland habitat outside the Thames Basin Heaths area. Heathland is a vital habitat for ground nesting birds and other heathland habitats in Surrey are protected at an international level. Heathlands are prone to bush fires during episodes of extreme heat as Surrey experienced this summer. The project will test the viability of 'wetting up' or raising the water levels on heath to provide it with a greater level of protection from fires.



Fire crews tackle the extensive fire

at Bisley Heath in July 2022.

At a smaller but just as important scale, the Council are working with Surrey Wildlife Trust and our local tenant farmer on land between Howell Hill and Priest Hill nature reserves in Epsom. The project will safeguard a rare flowering plant which grow in the arable fields between the two chalk downland sites. The aim is to create a larger nature reserve which supports nature recovery alongside farming.

Carrying out important restoration work

The Council continue to support Surrey Wildlife Trust to conduct important conservation work on the protected land it owns. 98% of the sites are in favourable or improving condition which is testament to the conscientious work carried out by the Trust.

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The Council hosts three conservation partnerships in the county to support works on sites owned by borough and district councils as well as private landowners. They harness over 2,000 hours of volunteer time a year towards conservation. This year they have been supporting the local parish council in Brockham to restore the limeworks as well as maintaining ancient woodlands at Staffhurst Wood in Tandridge.

Volunteers from the Council's Green Champions Network will be helping with conservation work on the Basingstoke Canal this month. Team leaders from the Basingstoke Canal Society, trained by the Basingstoke Canal Authority will be guiding them to clear pennywort, a highly invasive non-native floating plant that can grow up to 20cm a day drawing light and oxygen from the canal's wildlife. Mechanical removal is the only method available given the harm posed by chemicals in this protected environment.



Volunteers who had been working to clear scrub at Jubilee Wood met the giraffes who gladly received the brush for feed at Chessington World of Adventures.



Volunteers clearing ragwort at Norbury Park this summer.

A cross Council team has been working with Contractors to restore a brownfield site at Caterham Downs. The project has cleaned the soil to restore over two acres of chalk downland (a habitat as richly diverse as the Amazon rainforest) and has won a Green Apple award for its results.



Increasing biodiversity through natural flood risk management – Horsell Common

The Flooding and Climate Resilience Team have been working with the Horsell Common Preservation Society to tackle local flooding and to improve the biodiversity and accessibility of Horsell Common as well as planting trees.

The project has seen the construction of new wetlands which help reduce flood risk in Woking as well as an amazing new habitat made up of three large ponds and a wooden boardwalk for increased public access for recreation which improves a popular commuting route. The works are planned to be complete this Autumn.

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Protecting land through acquisitions with partner organisations

This year the property team at the Council led on the partnership purchase of Tice meadow, a former quarry site which has been made into a nature park. The handover was complete last month and commemorated with the planting of a tree. The Council is now reviewing how the site can be joined or linked with other publicly owned assets, such as Tongham Pools and the Black Water Valley route, to create nature corridors via a masterplan for the area.



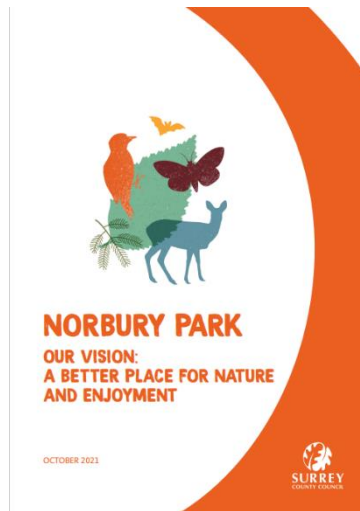
The River Thames Scheme is the Council's largest environmental project where it is working in partnership with the Environment Agency on a £600m project to reduce the risks of flooding from the River Thames in the boroughs of Spelthorne and Runnymede. It takes a whole landscape approach to adapting the Thames River basin to support flooding, people, property and nature. It will deliver a 20% net increase in biodiversity by creating a new network of habitat areas and green open space. It is a vital corridor for supporting nature year-round and for migrating birds as they venture north or south. The project team are hosting a series of public consultation events throughout November and into December which has also attracted media coverage including from BBC London News: [England's largest flood defence scheme begins - YouTube](#). This highlights the multiple opportunities that come with the scheme as well as the discovery of a rare mayfly identified during environmental surveys that are taking place ([River Thames: Rare species found as flood defences considered - BBC News](#)).

Working with our farmers to generate more positive land management outcomes

The Council owns 17 farms, and the service has recently been asked by the Property team to help support positive outcomes for both farmers and natural capital. A more sustainable approach to land management is being trialled on at least five of our farms by adopting regenerative farming practices and reviewing the investment potential with tenant farmers for projects such as solar panels and anaerobic digestion. Alongside a whole farm/estate approach to increasing the natural value of our assets, we are also working with specific tenant farmers to replace hedges, plant trees, trial agroforestry techniques and support the development of localised food hubs and centres of excellence on successful farming on grade 3 farmland.



At Norbury Park we have agreed a vision for the estate which prioritises maximising natural capital in the park. The vision will now be followed by the collation of data to support a holistic approach to land management which enables growth in its carbon sequestration and nature conservation value. This will drive a new approach to decision making which favours investment in natural capital as well as increasing farmer's income from new market schemes such as carbon credits and biodiversity net gain, and new food markets such plant-based protein. This will make farming in the Park more sustainable environmentally and economically.



Delivering biodiversity benefits at all our operational sites

The service manages the grounds of over 260 operational sites, including libraries, schools, care homes and council offices. This year across these sites over six hectares of land has been set aside for meadow creation. Next year this will be extended to plant or restore hedges on site.

The Tree Planting team have recently recruited an Ecologist dedicated to supporting schools with nature and habitats in their outdoor spaces. This will include tree planting, meadow creation and information on how to best support local nature on site.



Leatherhead Trinity School



Buckland Primary School



Bramley C of E Infant and Nursery School

Working towards our target to plant 1.2 million trees

The Council continues to make excellent progress in its ambition to plant a tree for every resident by 2030. The slide below sets out its current journey and successes including securing £448,000 in match funding this year.



Educating the next generation

This year the service has completed the refurbishment of the Discovery Centre at Newlands Corner which provides electronic displays on nature and recreation at all SCC's Countryside Sites. Conservation is an important element of education in the centre which overlooks a new wildlife area. Next year new features will include a section on the ancient yew trees at Newlands Corner and how visitors can support their protection. Interest in biodiversity is harnessed and encouraged through visitor blogs and recording of flora and fauna especially on national butterfly day. The play equipment installed, using sustainable local timber logs, is designed to promote play in the natural environment and promote links between children and nature.

Each of the Council's 19 countryside sites have a collection of five icons in their branding, each representing the unique collection of species at that site. These are being used to create new trails. For example at Newlands Corner there is a short dormouse trail and a longer deer trail.



Newlands Corner Discovery Centre



The Service has been working in partnership with the Council's Youth Teams to reopen the Sawmill at Norbury Park as part of a woodland hub focused on supporting woodland management on the estate. The teams will be using the workshop to train apprentices and provide young people with skills in woodland and wood crafts. The partnership has been particularly innovative in the products it will be providing the wider community. Schemes include the provision of sustainable urban drainage planters for trees in urban areas, timber logs from ash die back felling for schools to create fire circles and using coppiced materials from the park's woodlands for fence making. Spare logs will also be chopped for fuel poverty schemes.

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The Sawmill at Norbury Park

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION STRATEGY

In addressing the challenges of climate change it is important that we recognise that there are two sides to the coin of the climate emergency:

Firstly, we need to meet the net zero challenge to maintain our Greenhouse Gas emissions below the threshold at which climate impacts become excessively dangerous to our global society (i.e., 1.5 to 2°C). SCC's approach to tackling this is set out in the Surrey Climate Change Strategy and Delivery Plan.

Secondly it is essential that we work now to adapt to the climate impacts already built into the system even if we meet Net Zero – those deemed potentially manageable but that still require us to be more resilient and change how we operate and run everything in our society.

This summer we have seen that these impacts are already affecting Surrey residents, our services and infrastructure with record breaking temperatures followed by drought and then more recently surface water flooding.

Although the existing Surrey Climate Change Strategy and Greener Futures programmes acknowledge the need for climate change resilience it is important that we work with our partners to develop a collective strategy and action plan to ensure Surrey adapts to the already changing climate.

This strategy is under development, being written in-house by two key Climate Change Adaptation specialists, with a draft due in early 2023. A strategic cross-sectoral workshop has taken place this month at the WWF Living Planet Centre with key technical officers from SCC, Districts and Boroughs and lead partner organisations. Below is the word-cloud from participants regarding what they would like to see Surrey be like in 2050:

The Strategy is identifying high level pathways to ensure that we are resilient and adapting to increased flooding, droughts, heatwaves, wildfires, and other knock-on impacts, such as food security, disease burden and impacts on agriculture and other sectors. High level discussions on trade-offs and financing will need to take place in the coming years. Strong governance, and partnerships will be key in ensuring that we can work collectively across organisations to ensure a resilient and climate adapted Surrey into the future.

What one word describes your vision for Surrey 2050 within this agenda?



An Action Plan will be included with the Strategy and across SCC directorates more detailed risk assessments will need to take place.

This work will be further outlined in the members seminar on Monday 28th November.

COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT

Communications activities have most recently been focused on support for residents amid the cost-of-living crisis and using this engagement to also deliver greener future objectives. Campaigns have featured energy saving tips, promotion of the sustainable warmth grant and the launch of warm hubs. The objectives of these campaigns are to:

- Mitigate the impact of inflation and cost of living for Surrey's residents, particularly those most at risk of food and fuel poverty over the winter
- Increase resident understanding of financial and welfare support available
- Increase uptake of, and access to, support available
- Encourage behaviour change to reduce bills, protect the environment, improve health & wellbeing
- Increase awareness of SCC support and delivery.

A broad range of communication channels have been used to deliver messages including media, social media, google advertising, articles in D&B/ Parish and other magazines, our website, hard-copy publicity materials in food banks, libraries, GPs etc and advertising at shopping centres, railway stations and bus stops.

Some recent communication highlights:

- **Sustainable Warmth Grant** – Following distribution of a Directory of Support to every Surrey household and 45, 000 flyers to targeted locations, calls to Action Surrey about the grant rose by **a third in just 5 days** and have continued to grow. Additionally, **15, 000** people have been reached so far on social media. The response is well-beyond what is expected at this stage.
- **Warm Hubs** – while it is early days for warm hubs, over **6, 600** people have seen our social media posts and **362** have clicked through for more information already

- **Greener Matters Newsletter** – recently re-branded and promoted. This has led to a **113% increase in subscribers**
- Promoting this weekend's **tree giveaway** at selected libraries has so far been seen by **over 32, 000 people** on Facebook alone
- Highlighting our work at Horsell Common in Woking to alleviate flooding which was featured on **BBC Surrey** and in the **Woking News and Mail**.

Working in partnership with District & Borough Council Colleagues

We continue to work together with Surrey's District and Borough Councils on our approach to tackling Climate Change and becoming a net-zero carbon emissions county by 2050. At the latest Greener Futures Partnership Steering Group, a meeting of the Lead Councillors and Directors for Climate Change across the County, District and Borough Councils, we had an interesting and productive discussion about developing new collaborative projects across all 12 councils. We have already achieved both emissions and financial savings for local residents and businesses by working together on programmes like Sustainable Warmth and LoCASE, and we look forward to delivering more collaborative projects to maximise the impact of our resources. We also recognise the fantastic progress the District and Borough Councils have made on reducing carbon emissions, as evidenced by the case studies they contributed to the upcoming assessment of the Greener Futures Climate Change Delivery Plan

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