

**BIODIVERSITY & NET GAIN
STRATEGY
2023 - 2028**



FOREWORD

As Chair of the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee, and local councillor, it is my privilege to introduce Wirral Council's Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy, a blueprint for safeguarding and enhancing the rich biodiversity of Wirral.

In recent years, the urgency to protect our natural habitats and the species that inhabit them has become much clearer. This is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world and we have to act. The strategy we lay before you is not just a response to this urgency but a proactive and achievable approach to ensure that our local environment thrives for generations to come.

Fully committed to embedding the consideration of biodiversity at every level of the Council's operations, we are also looking to harness the wealth of local knowledge and expertise to better address biodiversity issues. By involving our residents, volunteers, and community groups, we will create initiatives that are both inclusive and tailored to Wirral's unique environment.

This strategy is not just the council's responsibility; it is a community endeavour. Everyone has a role to play in protecting and enhancing our biodiversity. The strategy aims to empower each of us to take positive actions in neighbourhoods and communities. Together, we can foster wildlife-friendly habitats and promote sustainable practices that make a real difference for nature and people.

As we embark on this journey, we are aware of the financial challenges that lie ahead for the Council. If our aim is to create a much more biodiverse borough, then we will have to be resourceful, like nature. If successful, we will create a place where future generations can enjoy a richer natural heritage and all the health and wellbeing benefits associated with this. The journey starts here.



Liz Grey

Chair, Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee

Vision Statement

This Biodiversity and Net Gain Strategy envisions a thriving, interconnected ecosystem, harmoniously coexisting with our vibrant communities in Wirral. In the five year span of this strategy, we are committed to nurturing biodiversity, enhancing our natural heritage, and embracing ecological resilience. Through robust planning, development that gives back more than it takes, and passionate community involvement, we aim to restore habitats, bolster species populations, and protect our vital ecosystem services. Under this strategy, Wirral will become a beacon of environmental stewardship and best practice, where the wonders of nature enrich our lives, where biodiversity flourishes, and where future generations inherit a thriving, ecologically balanced Wirral.

The purpose of this Strategy

- To provide Wirral Councils 'first considerations' of what actions to take for biodiversity and how we will champion the enhanced Biodiversity Duty (Environment Act 2021)
- To provide a framework for change and action towards the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in Wirral
- To inform decision making and establish a robust governance and monitoring framework for biodiversity actions

Overarching aims

- Establishing a robust Biodiversity Action Plan for Wirral
- Outlining compliance with Biodiversity Net Gain legislation
- Engaging our residents and communities to take action for biodiversity in Wirral
- Embedding biodiversity considerations in everything we do in Wirral Council
- Harnessing local knowledge, expertise and data in our decision making and action

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WHAT IS BIODIVERSITY AND NET GAIN?

What is Biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the natural world around us. It's all the living things that make up our environments. It is the variety of these things and how they interact with each at all levels that creates biodiversity. The plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms that live in our environment which, given the right circumstances and under the right conditions, create ecosystems that are delicately balanced to support the world in which we live.

Biodiversity is often viewed as something 'nice to look at' but it is much more than this. Without biodiversity, many of the support systems that we as communities and individuals rely on would collapse both at a global and a local level. What we call 'ecosystem services' such as cleaning our air and water, providing natural flood defences, pollinating our food, carbon sequestration and many more would be lost without biodiversity. This is why it is so important that we conserve and enhance the biodiversity that surrounds us and reinstate it where it has once been lost.

Why are we developing a Strategy?

Biodiversity is facing unprecedented threats from human activities, including habitat destruction, climate change, pollution, and overexploitation of natural resources. These threats are driving the decline of many species, and putting the functioning of ecosystems, and the services they provide, at risk.

The International Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has produced a report showing the seriousness of biodiversity losses worldwide (<https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment>). As with climate change, we need to act rapidly before worse consequences happen.

As a response to these challenges, this Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy has been developed to address the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity within our local area and region. This strategy will outline a set of priorities and objectives to protect and enhance biodiversity, to ensure its long-term survival, and to support the delivery of wider environmental benefits.

It will be built on the recognition that local action is critical in the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity. The Council want to encourage and support the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, landowners, and Wirral's many wildlife organisations in the implementation of our objectives.

Our biodiversity objectives aim to deliver a range of benefits, including the enhancement of local biodiversity, the protection and restoration of valuable habitats, and the provision of ecosystem services that support human well-being. They also acknowledge the importance of addressing the causes of biodiversity loss, including climate change, pollution, and unsustainable development and land practices.

This will be our framework for action that will be both ambitious and achievable. The development and implementation of this strategy will require a collaborative effort, involving a range of stakeholders, working together to achieve a shared vision. By working together to protect and enhance biodiversity, we can ensure that future generations inherit a Wirral that is rich in biodiversity and able to provide the ecosystem services we all rely on.

What is Biodiversity Net Gain?

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is a concept that aims to ensure that development projects result in a net gain of biodiversity, rather than a loss. BNG requires that any loss of biodiversity caused by development is compensated for by measures to enhance or create habitats, with the goal of delivering an overall increase in biodiversity.

In England, BNG is a mandatory requirement of the Environment Act 2021. From January 2024, development projects must deliver a 10% net gain in biodiversity. The UK government has also established a metric for measuring biodiversity net gain, known as the Biodiversity Metric, which is used to calculate the biodiversity value of habitats and inform decision-making around development projects. The Biodiversity Metric also includes a 'Small Sites Metric' which is a simplified version of the Biodiversity Metric designed for use on small development sites.

The aim of BNG is to ensure that development projects are carried out in a way that supports the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity, while also meeting the needs of society and the economy. By delivering a net gain in biodiversity, developments can contribute to the wider goal of halting and reversing biodiversity loss and support the delivery of ecosystem services that are essential to human well-being.

The concept of BNG is based on the principle of the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy, which prioritises avoidance, minimisation, mitigation, and finally compensation, in that order. BNG goes further by requiring that development projects deliver a measurable and quantifiable net gain in biodiversity, rather than simply seeking to balance any losses. Any mitigation and/or compensation requirements for 'Habitat Sites', other statutory designated sites or irreplaceable habitats are dealt with separately from biodiversity net gain provision.

Biodiversity net gain is additional to any habitat creation/enhancement required to mitigate or compensate for impacts. It is also important to note that biodiversity net gain should be applied to all habitat features within proposed development and can be delivered even if there are no losses or impacts from development.

Biodiversity Mitigation Hierarchy

The biodiversity mitigation hierarchy is a framework used to guide the management of biodiversity impacts in development projects, as outlined in paragraph 180 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The hierarchy consists of four steps:

1. **Avoidance:** The first step is to avoid impacts on biodiversity wherever possible. This may involve siting a development away from sensitive areas or avoiding activities that could cause harm to species or habitats. This necessitates the consideration of BNG at a very early stage of the project design process.
2. **Minimisation:** If avoidance is not possible, the next step is to minimise impacts on biodiversity. This may involve modifying project design or practices to reduce harm to species or habitats.
3. **Mitigation:** If impacts on biodiversity cannot be avoided or minimised, the next step is to restore or enhance affected habitats or species. This may involve restoring degraded habitats, creating new habitats, or implementing measures to support the recovery of affected species.
4. **Compensation:** If all other options have been exhausted, the final step is to offset any remaining biodiversity impacts. This may involve investing in biodiversity conservation or restoration projects elsewhere or providing compensation for any residual harm caused by the development.

WHY NOW?

Biodiversity is important. It provides ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being. These services include the provision of food, clean water, air purification, climate regulation, and natural resources. Without these services, our economies and societies would struggle to function.

Biodiversity is also important in its own right; it has intrinsic value and a right to exist. The diversity of life on Earth is a source of wonder and beauty, and it is our responsibility to protect it for future generations.

Biodiversity is important for the resilience of ecosystems, as it allows them to adapt to changing conditions and maintain their functioning over time. Biodiversity provides a buffer against disturbances such as climate change and disease and ensures that ecosystems can continue to provide their vital services.

However, biodiversity is under threat from a range of human activities, including habitat destruction, pollution, overexploitation of natural resources, and climate change. The rate of species extinction is currently estimated to be 100-1,000 times higher than the natural rate, and up to one million species are at risk of extinction in the coming decades. If too many species are lost from an ecosystem, then those ecosystems cease to function.

This loss of biodiversity has significant implications for our own well-being, as it reduces the provision of ecosystem services and undermines their resilience. It also has wider implications for the functioning of the Earth system, as biodiversity loss can lead to feedbacks that exacerbate climate change and other environmental problems.

Protecting biodiversity is therefore a crucial priority for society, and one that requires urgent action. We need to take immediate steps to address the drivers of biodiversity loss, and to protect and restore biodiversity through a range of conservation and restoration measures.

LEGISLATIVE AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT

National Legislation

The following are key pieces of legislation and strategies relating to Biodiversity and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in England:

1. **The National Planning Policy Framework 2021:** The policy framework sets out the government's planning policies for England. It requires Local Planning Authorities to consider BNG when making decisions on development proposals.

The framework also requires plans and policies to contribute to and enhance the natural environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures.

Habitats and Biodiversity

To protect and enhance biodiversity, plans are also required to identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitat and wider ecological networks.

2. **The Environment Act 2021:** The Environment Act 2021 introduces provisions for mandatory biodiversity net gain and an enhanced 'Biodiversity Duty' in England. These provisions include:
 - a. **Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain:** The Act requires all new development projects in England to deliver a mandatory biodiversity net gain. This means that the biodiversity value of a site must be enhanced by at least 10% compared to its pre-development state.
 - b. **Biodiversity Metric:** The Act establishes a new biodiversity metric, which will be used to measure the biodiversity value of a site and the biodiversity net gain achieved through development projects. The metric has been developed by DEFRA and Natural England and will be based on a range of ecological factors, including the condition and species richness of habitats.
 - c. **Conservation Covenants:** The Act allows for the creation of conservation covenants, which are legally binding agreements between landowners and conservation

bodies or public authorities. These covenants will enable landowners to commit to delivering long-term biodiversity benefits on their land, and to ensure that these benefits are maintained even if the land is sold or passed on to future generations.

d. **Local Nature Recovery Strategies:** The Act requires local authorities in England to produce Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), which will identify priority areas for biodiversity conservation and enhancement at the local level. The LNRS will be developed in consultation with stakeholders, including local communities and businesses, and will inform the planning process. For Merseyside, the LNRS is being produced by Liverpool City Region, in consultation with adjoining authorities.

3. **Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (TCPA):** The Environment Act inserts new provisions for Biodiversity Net Gain within the TCPA outlining all related conditions required for planning approval (including a new general condition). This includes satisfying that the ‘biodiversity gain objective’ has been met “...in relation to development for which planning permission is granted if the biodiversity value attributable to the development exceeds the pre-development biodiversity value of the onsite habitat by at least the relevant percentage”. It also outlines the need for the submission and approval of a Biodiversity Gain Plan.
4. **The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC Act):** This Act sets out an enhanced ‘Biodiversity Duty’, the ‘General Biodiversity Objective’ for all public authorities in England, including Local Authorities. The Act requires public authorities to have regard to the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity when carrying out their functions. This means that Local Authorities, as public authorities, have a legal duty to consider the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity when making decisions or taking actions that could affect the natural environment.
5. **The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act):** Section 1 of the CROW Act requires that any exercise of public access rights under the Act must have regard for the conservation of natural beauty and the flora, fauna, and geological or physiographical features of the land. The CROW Act also established the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), which is responsible for advising the government on matters relating to the conservation of biodiversity and the management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

6. **The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981:** This Act provides protection for certain species of animals and plants, as well as their habitats. Under this act it is an offense to intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy, or disturb a protected species or its habitat. The Act also established Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which are nationally important protected areas with exceptional ecological or geological features.
7. **The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017:** These regulations implement the European Union's Habitats Directive and Birds Directive in the UK. They provide protection for a range of habitats and species of European importance, including Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Most of Wirral's coast carries these designations.

Local Policy & Strategies

Wirral Council Local Plan 2021-2037

Wirral's forthcoming Local Plan has been developed to create a low carbon and high biodiversity backdrop across its development policies. It will direct decision making on planning applications in Wirral in a way that protects and enhances biodiversity. The plan will continue to protect designated sites and seeks biodiversity net gain from developments to address the Environment and Climate emergency. It aims to protect habitats and species and drive wider environmental gains through new development, increasing the value of land and water to support biodiversity. Below are the key policy drivers that will support the enhancement and protection of biodiversity in Wirral.

Policy WS5 – Strategy for Green and Blue Infrastructure, Open Space, Biodiversity and Landscape Protection

Under this policy, developments will contribute to high quality and coherent networks of blue and green infrastructure in Wirral. It provides considerations for:

- Green and blue infrastructure networks
- Open space provision
- Ecological Networks
- Mitigating recreational disturbance on international sites for nature conservation
- Maintenance of green infrastructure and open space provision

- Landscape Character

This policy also outlines developer contributions to BNG, aligning national legislative requirements at a local policy level. This describes what developers must do to satisfy mandatory 10% BNG.

Policy – WD3 Biodiversity and Geodiversity

This policy aims to protect designated biodiversity or geodiversity assets, priority habitats or priority species of conservation concern, legally protected species, and irreplaceable habitats including ancient woodland. It does this by:

- Requiring Habitat Regulation Assessments where developments may result in significant impact on internationally important sites.
- Upholding the mitigation and compensation hierarchy where impact on biodiversity is unavoidable.
- Requiring Ecological Appraisal and Impact Assessments (including standards) for developments that may affect ecological features.
- Requires details of long-term management including management, monitoring and maintenance of mitigating measures.

Below are the key Council Strategies that align with the protection and enhancement of biodiversity and the delivery of BNG. They include:

Climate Emergency Declaration and Policy Statement

On 15th July 2019, Wirral Council declared a Climate Emergency to address the ecological and climate crisis. One of the key priorities under this declaration was to 'Protect and Enhance Biodiversity'. It will do this by:

- Managing at least 30% of land in Wirral for the benefit of wildlife by 2030
- Ensure 'net gain' in biodiversity across all Council land
- Increase tree planting to double Wirral's tree canopy cover
- Increase the number of parks and open spaces achieving green flag status

Wirral's Tree Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy 2020-2030

Wirral Council's Tree Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy outlines how the council will manage and increase trees and hedgerows between 2020 and 2030. It recognises the importance of trees and hedgerows for both the health and wellbeing of Wirral's communities and environment. The strategy is focused on protecting and increasing Wirral's Urban Forest with 210,000 trees planted over a ten-year period to double canopy cover.

The strategy recognises the importance of trees for biodiversity and net gain, providing opportunities to develop coherent ecological networks that are resilient to future pressures. Trees and hedgerows often represent opportunities for wildlife and biodiversity in urban settings and can provide vital steppingstones for wildlife across the borough.

In June 2023 an i-Tree survey was undertaken to better understand Wirral's tree and hedgerow provision and the services they support. In relation to biodiversity:

- Wirral's urban forest can play a significant role in supporting and protecting biodiversity.
- Wirral has a relatively low abundance of trees that support invertebrates.
- Goat Willow is considered the best species for supporting insects but only represents 1% of Wirral's tree community.
- Increasing the provision of Common Holly, Willow species, and Common Hawthorn would improve provision of pollen and nectar.
- 4 out of 5 of Wirral's most common tree species are rated highly as providers of fruits and seeds and increasing the population of Oak and Blackthorn would support this further.

Wirral's Pollinator Strategy 2022-2030

The Pollinator Strategy seeks to address the decline in pollinators and recognises the importance of biodiversity and more natural environments. The strategy was designed to deliver on the biodiversity pillar of Wirral's Climate Emergency Policy Statement to support biodiversity locally. Pollinators are essential for healthy and functioning ecosystems and the services they provide. Providing tangible action to protect and reduce declining populations the strategy addresses factors such as habitat loss, land use practices and climate change.

Wirral's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy 2020

Wirral's Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy is a comprehensive exploration of the role and significance of 'Green and Blue Infrastructure' (GBI) within Wirral. This encompasses not only how GBI can support healthy ecosystems but also its pivotal role in addressing challenges like climate change. It specifically touches upon the benefits of carbon sequestration, the promotion of greenways for sustainable travel, flood risk management, and mitigation of urban heat island effects. An opportunity assessment also details a roadmap, pinpointing key issues, emerging opportunities, and priority actions to deliver GBI in Wirral. A central theme is the safeguarding of Wirral's distinct ecological resources and the management of recreational pressures on vital habitats. Furthermore, the strategy introduces the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), emphasising the requirement for all developmental projects to provide a 10% net gain.

In addition, the most common GI features are captured within the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Metric and can contribute towards the outcome of a BNG assessment on proposed development. Within the BNG Metric, development proposals are scored against the strategic significance of any proposed interventions for biodiversity. This means that any BNG proposal that contributes to the objectives, targets or priorities within such agreed and published strategies will inform the strategic significance scores and BNG outcomes.

Liverpool City Region (LCR) Ecological Network

The Liverpool City Region (LCR) Ecological Network is a comprehensive collection of ecological and biodiversity information that aims to enhance the protection and management of the Liverpool City Region's natural assets.

The LCR Ecological Network comprises:

- A Core Biodiversity Area combining Designated Sites and Priority Habitats,
- Linear Features such as hedgerows, canal, and rivers,
- Steppingstone Sites i.e., ponds, and
- A Nature Improvement Area including 17 Focus Area profiles. When combined these Focus Areas form the LCR Nature Improvement Area (NIA) which provides an LCR-wide opportunity for the strategic delivery of biodiversity outcomes.

Liverpool City Region Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) has been mandated under the Environment Act 2021. The preparation of the LNRS will be led by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) in collaboration with public, private, and voluntary sectors. At a minimum the LNRS will contain a local habitat map and the identification of biodiversity priority areas to help focus action for nature recovery and support the delivery of Biodiversity Net Gain. For example, the LNRS can be used to target offsite BNG so that it directly contributes to the Nature Recovery Network. It will help people see where action to recover nature in their area will be most effective in providing the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment. Once complete, the LNRS will supersede the LCR Ecological network as the evidence base for informing decision making at a local level.

Strategic Links

The Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy represents a consolidation of the Council's commitments and objectives for biodiversity in Wirral. It provides the framework and outlines the legislative drivers for tangible action and accountability for delivery. Biodiversity is the common thread across these strategies and highlights the scope and scale of the challenges across the Council and the borough. Identifying strategic links now, means bringing stakeholders together to co-design initiatives and programmes of work, maximise funding opportunities and share learning, knowledge, and expertise. This will include bringing together services such as Parks & Countryside, Climate Change, Assets, Planning, and Regeneration.

New Duties

The Environment Act 2021 introduces an enhanced 'biodiversity duty' for Local Authorities in England. This new duty requires Local Authorities to take steps to conserve and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of their functions. They must also report publicly on the actions they have taken to meet this duty. They must do this by:

- Considering what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Agree policies and specific objectives based on their considerations.
- Act to deliver their policies and achieve their objectives.

The first consideration of what action the Council can take must be completed by 1 January 2024 and objectives must be agreed as soon as practicable thereafter. The development of this strategy aims to fulfil this requirement.

Key considerations must take note of how broader strategies influence how the Council complies with its duties including Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and Protected Site and Species Conservation Strategies.

The aim of this duty is to ensure Local Authorities contribute to the achievement of national goals and targets for biodiversity as set out in the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23). This plan commits to:

- By 2030
 - a. Halt the decline in species abundance.
 - b. Protect 30% of UK land.

- By 2042
 - a. Increase species abundance by 10%
 - b. Restore or create at least 500,000ha of wildlife rich habitat.
 - c. Reduce the risk of species extinction.
 - d. Restore 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition.
 - e. Halt the decline of species abundance.

The Council must consider biodiversity when taking decisions and actions that could impact biodiversity. This also includes identifying opportunities for Biodiversity Net Gain, where possible, and taking steps to avoid or mitigate harm to biodiversity.

The EIP23 also states that Local Authorities must also report publicly on their actions to conserve and enhance biodiversity by publishing a 'Biodiversity Report'. The first reporting period is no later than 1 January 2026 and no later than every five years thereafter. The report must include:

- a summary of actions taken to comply with the biodiversity duty
- how the Council plan to comply with the biodiversity duty in the next reporting period
- any other information on how the Council has delivered on the biodiversity duty

The report must also include specific information on Biodiversity Net Gain, including:

- the actions the Council and the Local Planning Authority carried out to meet biodiversity net gain obligations
- details of biodiversity net gains resulting, or expected to result, from biodiversity gain plans the Local Planning Authority have approved
- how the Council and the Local Planning Authority plans to meet biodiversity net gain obligations in the next reporting period

The reports must be easily accessible to the public, and Local Authorities must engage with local communities and stakeholders in developing them.

The enhanced duty for Local Authorities to conserve and enhance biodiversity requires them to take proactive steps to protect and improve the natural environment in their decision-making processes. It also requires them to be transparent and accountable in their actions, reporting regularly on progress and outcomes achieved.

OUR ROLE

The Council has an important role to play in conserving and enhancing biodiversity as its responsible for a range of functions that can impact biodiversity, including land use planning and development management, asset management, and the provision of public services.

The Council aims to fulfil it's through a number of actions, including:

1. Developing and implementing this Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan: This strategy will provide a framework for local action to conserve and enhance biodiversity. It sets out clear objectives and actions for local biodiversity, and will be based on an assessment of the local biodiversity offer.
2. Continuing to identify and designate Local Wildlife Sites: These are areas that are important for biodiversity and require special protection. Sites can be designated based on their importance for habitats, species, or geological features.
3. Applying 10% Biodiversity Net Gain: This involves considering how development projects could deliver a net gain in biodiversity, by retaining, enhancing or creating habitats of equal or greater ecological value.
4. Managing parks, gardens, open spaces, and other public green spaces: Wirral's Parks & Countryside Service maintains Wirral Council's 'green estate' which totals some 1,700 hectares of land. The Council will manage these areas to support biodiversity, for example, by maintaining and enhancing habitats that safeguard protected species and ecosystem services.
5. Engaging the public: The Council can engage the public in biodiversity conservation and enhancement through education and awareness-raising campaigns, citizen science projects, and volunteering opportunities.
6. Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS): The Council is a supporting authority for the Liverpool City Region LNRS and will contribute to the development and delivery of the LNRS.

WHAT MATTERS TO YOU

In June 2023, the Council held a public consultation on biodiversity and biodiversity priorities in Wirral. This included feedback on the biodiversity objectives as outlined in this strategy. This exercise aimed to raise awareness of biodiversity in Wirral and the forthcoming BNG legislation and allow residents and communities to comment on the challenges and opportunities facing biodiversity.

Biodiversity is important to Wirral's residents and communities with 89% of respondents being aware of biodiversity issues and 93% feeling that it is important to Wirral and its communities.

Wirral's residents felt that:

- Biodiversity is important for functioning ecosystems and the services they support.
- It provides important wildlife corridors for various species and it is important to enhance sites to promote more biodiversity.
- Climate resilience and protecting the green belt is vital for biodiversity

Threats and challenges

Development, habitat loss and poor land management practices were the top three scoring challenges and threats facing biodiversity in Wirral.

Target areas

Residents could suggest sites in Wirral that could be targeted for biodiversity and conservation action which will be considered in the forthcoming Biodiversity Action Plan. Examples include:

- Improving degraded SSSI sites of wet meadows
- Restoring wetland habitat and seasonal floodplains
- Managing greenspaces to support rare species
- Highlighting areas with notable species for review

Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy Objectives

All of Wirral's Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy objectives had a high-level agreement with all respondents. Harnessing the wealth of local knowledge and expertise and encouraging community action were particularly important in tackling biodiversity issues in Wirral.

BIODIVERSITY IN WIRRAL

Geological and Landscape Setting - Overview

Approximately two thirds of Wirral represent the Natural England National Character Area 59 (NCA 59 - Wirral¹) and is described as a peninsula formed by the Mersey and Dee estuaries with a unique landscape. As well as the urban areas, it consists of a pastoral landscape, sandstone ridges, lowland heathlands, coastal scenery, and valley woodlands. Wirral is rich in wildlife, with areas protected by national, European, and international designations. The coastal and estuarine landscapes provide many opportunities for recreation associated with wildlife, such as birdwatching and educational nature walks. Wirral also contains a mix of agricultural land, ponds and copses, and a low-lying remnant agricultural and horticultural area behind coastal embankments. A network of green infrastructure provides locations for people to enjoy the natural environment and supports biodiversity.

The majority of Wirral's coastline is undeveloped and is used for recreation and nature conservation. North Wirral is characterised by coastal sand dunes that are now separated from natural interaction with the foreshore by artificial defences, low-lying hinterland, and extensive sandy and muddy/sandy beaches. The Dee Estuary is located between the Wirral and north-east Wales and is of international importance for wildlife. The three small, low-lying sandstone islands of Hilbre are located approximately 1 km off the extreme north-west corner of the Wirral peninsula.

Wirral's coastal and estuarine habitats have high biodiversity value and are protected by national, European, and international designations. Mudflats, sand flats, salt marshes and grazing marshes support large populations of wildfowl and waders. Grass and arable farmland are important for feeding birds, while lowland heathland, infield ponds, ancient woodland and species-rich grassland support a wide range of species, including bats, brown hare and barn owl.

Wirral contains approximately 856 ha of woodland (5 per cent of the total area), which contains areas of ancient woodland. Ancient woodland is the most species-rich woodland and is at least 400 years old. Woodland in

¹ [NCA Profile: 59 Wirral - NE545 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/nca-profiles/59-wirral)

Wirral is mainly broadleaved and is found in wooded valleys, country parks, and estates.

National Character Area 58: Merseyside Conurbation

The east of Wirral represents the Natural England Character Area 58 (NCA 58 – Merseyside Conurbation²) which is a predominantly urban and suburban landscape, centred around the settlements of Birkenhead, Bebington, and Wallasey. The area is situated on a low-lying land, intersected by the lower estuary of the River Mersey. The region is known for its dense settlement patterns, with a significant portion of the land being used for industrial purposes, including docks and warehouses, which are connected by an extensive transport infrastructure.

The landscape of the area is characterised by a blend of natural and urban elements. The River Mersey flows northwest through the region, forming an estuary with deep channels, mudflats, and sandbanks. These mudflats and sand flats are internationally recognised as important feeding and roosting grounds for waders and wildfowl. Along the coast and at the mouth of the estuary, there are various wildlife habitats and designated sites. The region also features a network of green infrastructure interspersed among the urban fabric, offering important habitats for wildlife. This network includes local wildlife and geological sites, parks (e.g., Birkenhead Park), gardens, golf courses, and more.

However, the area faces challenges, including pressures for development and regeneration. There is a need to ensure that the natural environment is resilient enough to meet these demands. Enhancing the green infrastructure can help in managing surface waters, reducing flood risks, adapting urban environments for climate change resilience, promoting healthy activities, and conserving the area's distinctive biodiversity, landscape, and heritage.

² [NCA Profile: 58 Merseyside Conurbation - NE505 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/nca-profiles/58-merseyside-conurbation)

Statutory and Non-Statutory Designated Areas

Statutory Designations

In Wirral there are a range of areas that have been designated for their nature conservation value. These include statutory designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which are of national significance for the biodiversity and geological features they contain and support (see **Figure 1**).

Wirral has 12 SSSIs. A table of all SSSIs in Wirral with their current condition status is provided below. (Note – SSSIs are divided into sub-units for purposes of monitoring and surveys and may contain areas of varying condition):

Table 1: Descriptions and condition score for SSSIs in Wirral³

Site	Description	Condition
Dee Cliffs	Supralittoral Rock – Maritime Slope and Cliffs (clay cliffs and bank habitat), marl pits, and neutral grassland (lowland)	Favourable (87%)
		Unfavourable – No Change (13%)
Dee Estuary	Littoral Sediment – Mudflats, reedbeds, coastal saltmarsh	Favourable (100%)
Dibbinsdale	Broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland (lowland), reed swamp, fen pasture, and neutral grassland	Favourable (8%)
		Unfavourable Recovering (22%)
		Unfavourable No Change (22%)
		Unfavourable Declining (48%)
Heswall Dales	Dwarf shrub heath (lowland)	Unfavourable Recovering (100%)

³ [Site Search \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](http://naturalengland.org.uk)

Meols Meadows	Neutral Grassland (lowland)	Unfavourable No Change (100%)
Mersey Estuary (Unit 011 – Bromborough, Eastham, Ellesmere Port)	Littoral Sediment – mudflats and saltmarsh	Favourable (100%)
Mersey Narrows (Unit 002 – Egremont Foreshore and Unit 003 – Seacombe)	Littoral Sediment – open water, saltmarsh and grassland	Unfavourable Recovering (100%)
New Ferry	Littoral Sediment – intertidal sand, mudflats, saltmarsh	Unfavourable Recovering (100%)
North Wirral Foreshore	Littoral sediment – intertidal sand, mudflats and embryonic dune	Unfavourable Declining (100%)
Red Rocks	Supralittoral sediment – sand dunes, brackish dune slack, reedbeds	Unfavourable Recovering (72%)
		Unfavourable Declining (28%)
The Dungeon	Earth Heritage – Triassic siltstone formation	Favourable (100%)
Thurstaston Common	Dwarf shrub heath (lowland)	Unfavourable Recovering (100%)

In many of Wirral's SSSI sites there is an overlapping network of statutory national and European designations, these include:

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) – An SAC is an area which has been given special protection under the European Union's Habitats Directive. SACs provide increased protection to a variety of wild animals, plants and habitats and are a vital part of global efforts to conserve the world's biodiversity. In Wirral, this covers:

- Dee Estuary

Special Protection Areas (SPA) – An SPA is an area of land, water or sea which has been identified as being of international importance for the breeding, feeding, wintering or the migration of rare and vulnerable species of birds found within the European Union. SPAs are European designated sites, classified under the European Wild Birds Directive which affords them enhanced protection. In Wirral, this covers (these are shown in **Figure 2**):

- Dee Estuary
- Liverpool Bay
- Mersey Estuary
- Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore

RAMSAR Sites – These sites are wetlands of international importance, designated under the Ramsar Convention. Wetlands are defined as areas of marsh, fen, peatland, or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres. In Wirral, this covers (these are shown in **Figure 2**):

- Dee Estuary
- Mersey Estuary
- Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore

There is also a significant amount of land that provides habitat which is functionally linked to these international coastal sites principally located on the inland wetland and agricultural grassland but also includes Wirral Dockland.

Local Nature Reserves (LNR) – An LNR is a protected area of land designated by Wirral Council because of its local special natural interest, and educational and community value. As a local designation, these areas are protected through robust planning policy. In the forthcoming Wirral Council Local Plan 2021 – 2037, this is contained in Policy WD 3

Biodiversity and Geodiversity. In Wirral, this covers (these are shown in **Figure 1**):

- Bidston Moss LNR
- Brotherton Park and Dibbinsdale LNR
- Heswall Dales LNR
- Hilbre Islands LNR
- Thurstaston Common LNR

Non-Statutory Designations

Local Wildlife Sites – these sites are non-statutory areas of local importance for nature conservation that support nationally and internationally designated wildlife and geological sites. Local Wildlife Sites are identified and designated at a local level and are managed through the local Wildlife Trust and Wirral Council via the Local Wildlife Site Partnership. As well as supporting designated sites, these sites often contain priority or nationally threatened habitats and species. Wirral contains 69 Local Wildlife Sites which are shown in **Figure 3**.

Nature Improvement Areas (NIA) – Nature Improvement Areas are large, discrete areas that are intended to deliver a step change in nature conservation, offer significant improvements for wildlife and people through the sustainable use of natural resources, provide opportunities to restore and create wildlife habitats and enhance connectivity between local sites. Although NIAs are not designations, they have been developed at a Liverpool City Region level to support local planning and inform land management. NIA focus areas provide guidance where opportunities for ecological mitigation and compensation may be directed to provide benefits for biodiversity. Wirral contains or bounds seven NIAs which are shown in **Figure 4**.

Habitats and Species

Coastal

Many wading birds and wildfowl winter on Wirral's estuaries and foreshores or pass through on migration. These tidal habitats are internationally important for species such as Bar-tailed Godwit, Shelduck, Pintail, Oystercatcher, Knot, Redshank.

Sand dunes and salt marshes support nationally important plants and animals including Isle of Man Cabbage, Southern Horsetail, Vernal mining bees (*Colletes spp*), Whorl grass, Natterjack Toads and Grayling butterfly. There is a large suite of characteristic coastal plants such as Sea Beet, Marram grass, Sea Aster, Sea Milkwort and Sea rush, especially where the coast is accreting in the Dee Estuary and along the North Wirral Foreshore. The new habitats forming as a result of this geomorphological process are very important for coastal wildlife, which thrives on change.

Woodland

Ancient woodlands such as Dibbinsdale support characteristic flora such as Wood Anemone, Bluebell, Sanicle, Wood Sorrel, Pignut and Hairy Woodrush. More recent woodlands such as Storeton Wood and Stapleton Wood contain less variety but do provide habitat for birds such as Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch and Tree Creeper, and bases for wider-ranging animals such as Badgers, Brown Hares, and the recovering population of Polecat. Wirral's woodlands also provide foraging and roosting opportunities for mot bat species.

Hedgerows on Wirral range from species-poor examples, planted in Victorian times, to species-rich ones that are much older. The species-rich hedgerows are found on farmland such as near Storeton Lane and across Claremont Farm, Clatterbridge which include native Crab Apple and Guelder Rose. More study of Wirral's hedges is needed, to find more species-rich examples and to look at associated wildlife such as fungi.

Lowland Heathland

Lowland Heathland has suffered much loss nationally to development, agriculture and lack of management. Wirral is fortunate to have two SSSI areas (Thurstaston Common and Heswall Dales) as well as smaller patches. Wirral has lost areas of heathland due to challenges in management (e.g. Caldys Hill and Grange Hill). Heathland supports

important plants such as Bell Heather, Ling, Western Gorse and animals such as the Emperor moth.

Grassland

As in all of England, Wirral has very little species-rich grassland because of changes in agricultural practice in the last 70 years. Several small meadows at Meols are SSSI but are in unfavourable condition. Clifftop grasslands at Thurstaston are designated SSSI for several rare plants such as Dyers Greenwood, Trailing Tormentil and Pepper Saxifrage.

Small patches of species-rich grasslands remain elsewhere (e.g. on the roughs of various golf courses where agricultural herbicides have not been used). These support species such as a Small Copper butterfly and its foodplant Sheep's Sorrel, and harebell and wild carrot.

Wetlands

Apart from Wirral's coastal wetlands, there are still a fairly large number of ponds in Wirral, although on farmland many are polluted, drying out or shaded by trees. Good sets of ponds exist on several golf courses (e.g. Arrowe Park) where they support amphibians such as Great Crested Newt, Smoot Newt, Toad and Frog. They also support a wide range of aquatic life from Water Fleas, Mayflies and Water Louse to Dragonflies and Damselflies. Groups of ponds are particularly valuable as species can move between them as conditions change. Amphibians need suitable terrestrial habitat around ponds, for the large parts of the year they spend on land; this is often not available on intensively farmed land and can be lacking in formal landscapes.

Apart from the estuaries there are several small rivers in Wirral, which provide running freshwater habitats for species such as Eel and Water Vole, and corridors for wildlife to move around. Urban development affects both main systems, causing pollution and impacts on water levels. The River Birket system runs mostly through low fertility agricultural land and offers potential for large-scale wetland creation on the North Wirral Coastal Plain. The upper part of the Birket system, along with other land in north and west Wirral, is very important as supporting habitat for the estuarine birds, where they can feed and rest at high tide.

Urban

Urban habitats must not be neglected; they provide niches for unusual species and importantly give people contact with nature close to where they live. Where unused sites have been left for long periods, nature always moves in. New Ferry Butterfly Park (former railway sidings) and Port Sunlight River Park (former landfill) are managed to retain Open Mosaic Habitat, rich in wild flowers, bare patches, scrub and trees. Open Mosaic Habitat (a Priority Habitat) supports important invertebrate populations with 18 species of butterfly now breeding at New Ferry Butterfly Park. Other examples include Prenton Dell claypit which supports three species of orchid and Small Heath butterflies. Common Lizards and rare Centaury plants live on the dock estate at Bidston, adjacent to the Bidston Moss landfill site, which has now become important for breeding warblers and other birds. It is likely other areas of long-neglected land have important wildlife populations, but little survey work has been done which will be a priority of this strategy.

Gardens and Allotments

Gardens vary from sterile to species-rich depending on management, and there is much room for education and encouragement to gardeners to use environmentally friendly methods. They can be important residences for invertebrates and habitats for some species that are struggling in the rural areas, such as Hedgehog and Frog. Allotments are usually rich in wildlife because the varied approaches ensure a good variety of food for pollinators and other invertebrates. Increasing opportunities for people to grow their own food is likely to benefit biodiversity in Wirral.

Other Species

Some species present in Wirral range widely and need a variety of habitats to survive. These include (not exhaustive):

- Brown Hare (notable population from Landican Cemetery south into central Wirral)
- Various species of Bats (Pipistrelle, Noctule, Daubenton, Brown Long-Eared)
- Badger (at risk in Wirral from habitat loss, roadkill, and illegal persecution)
- Barn Owl (recovered from a low base population thanks to Wirral Barn Owl Trust but requires more long grass habitat for small mammal prey)

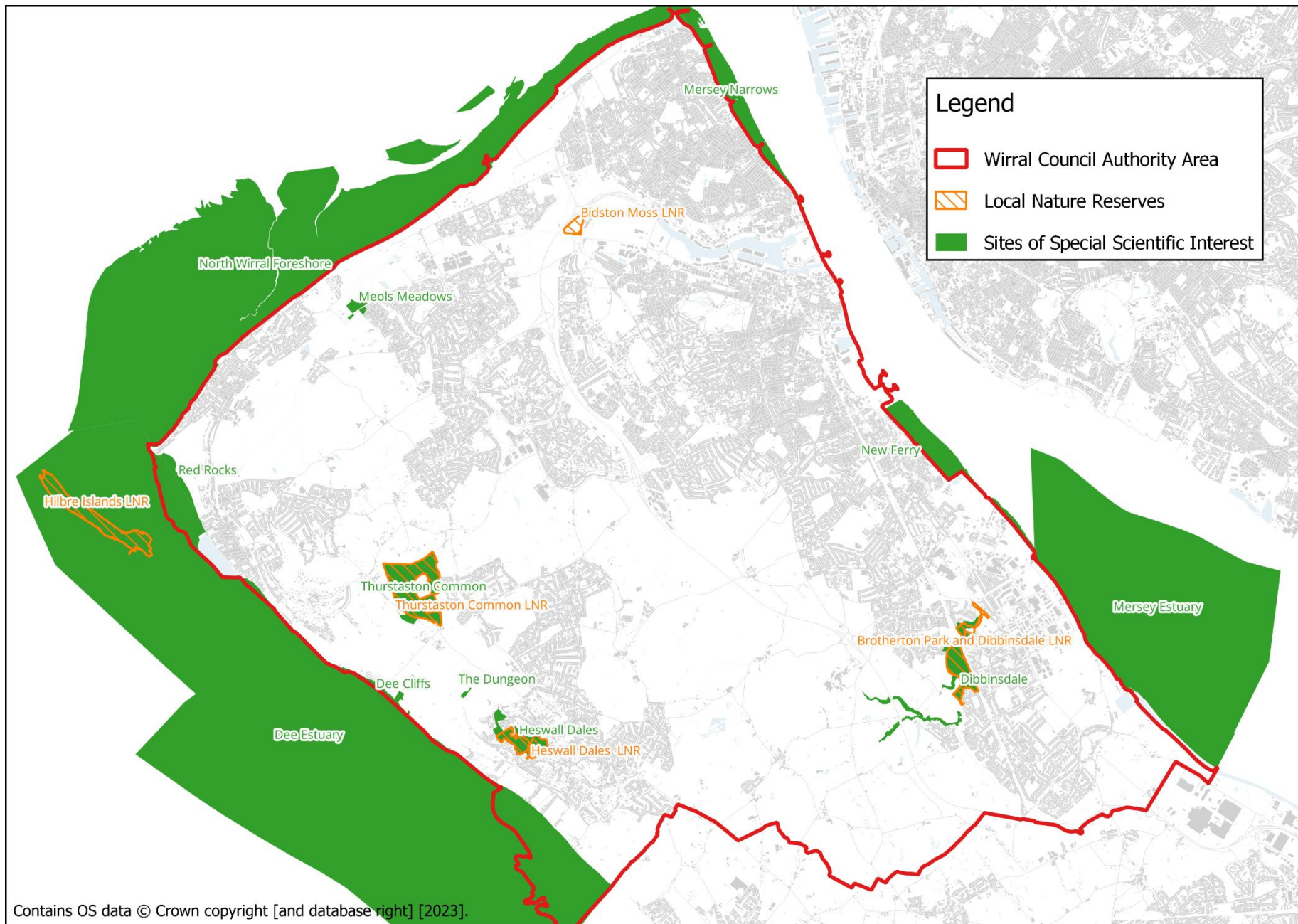


Figure 1: Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Local Nature Reserves

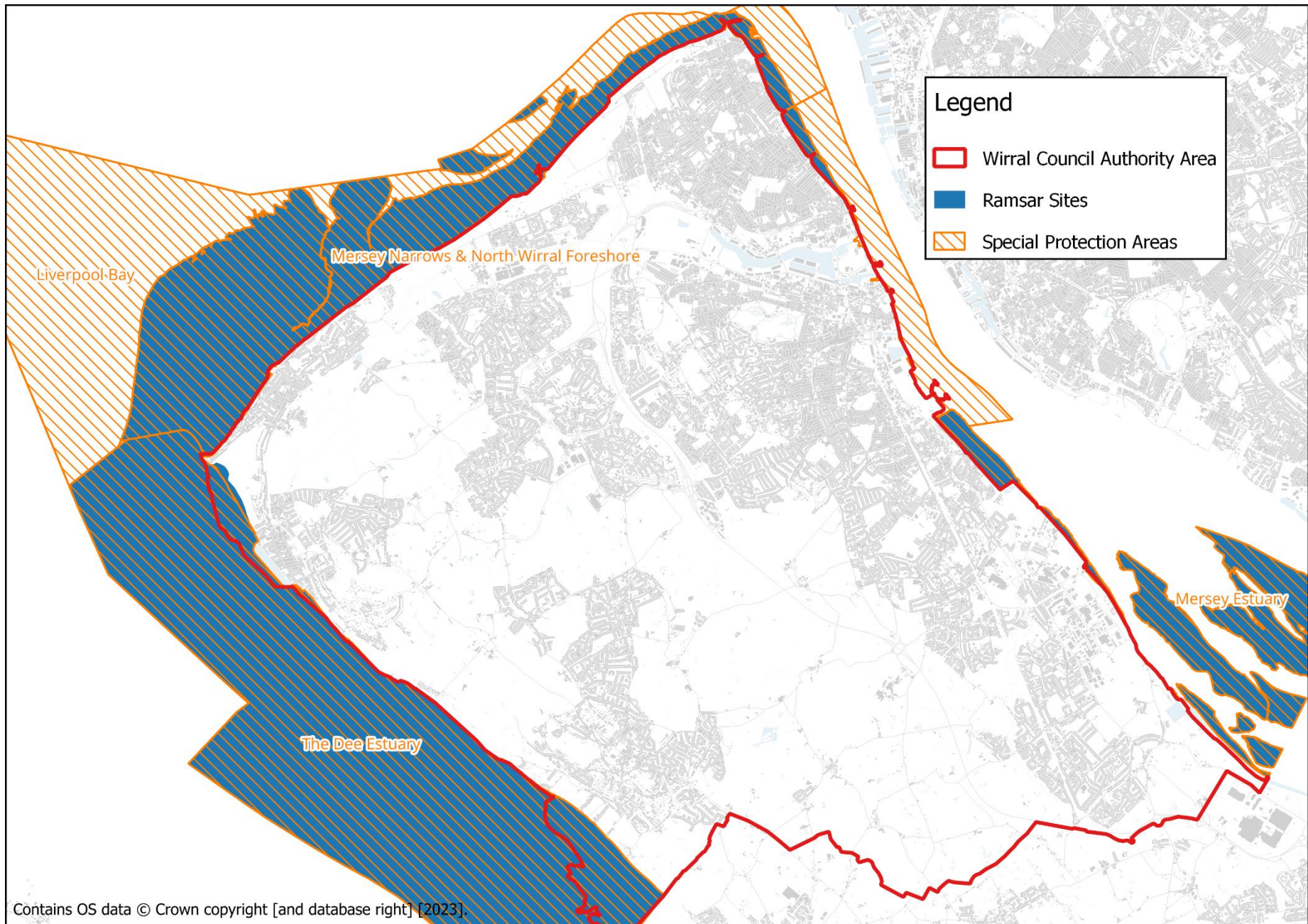


Figure 2: Ramsar Sites and Special Protection Areas

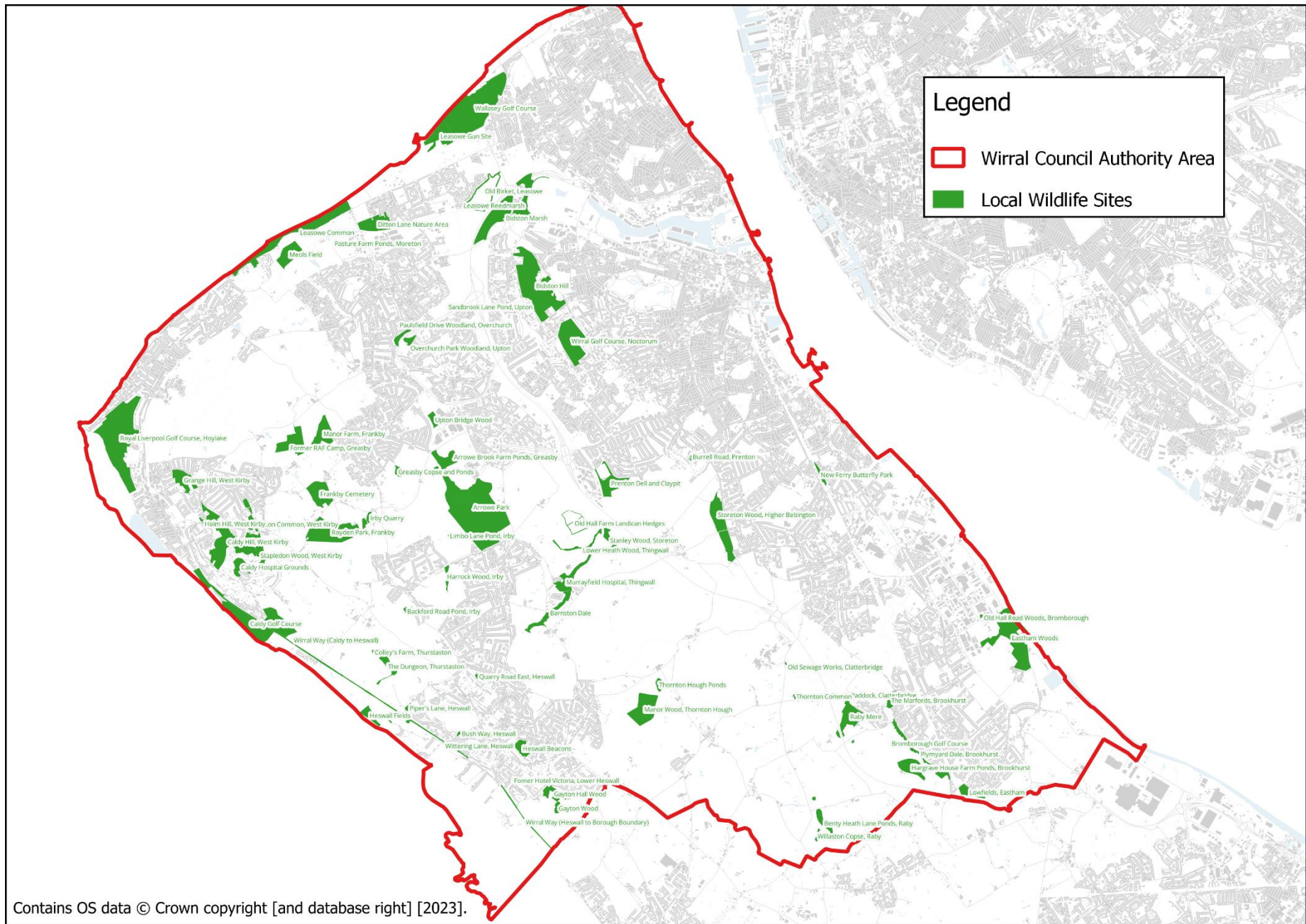


Figure 3: Local Wildlife Sites

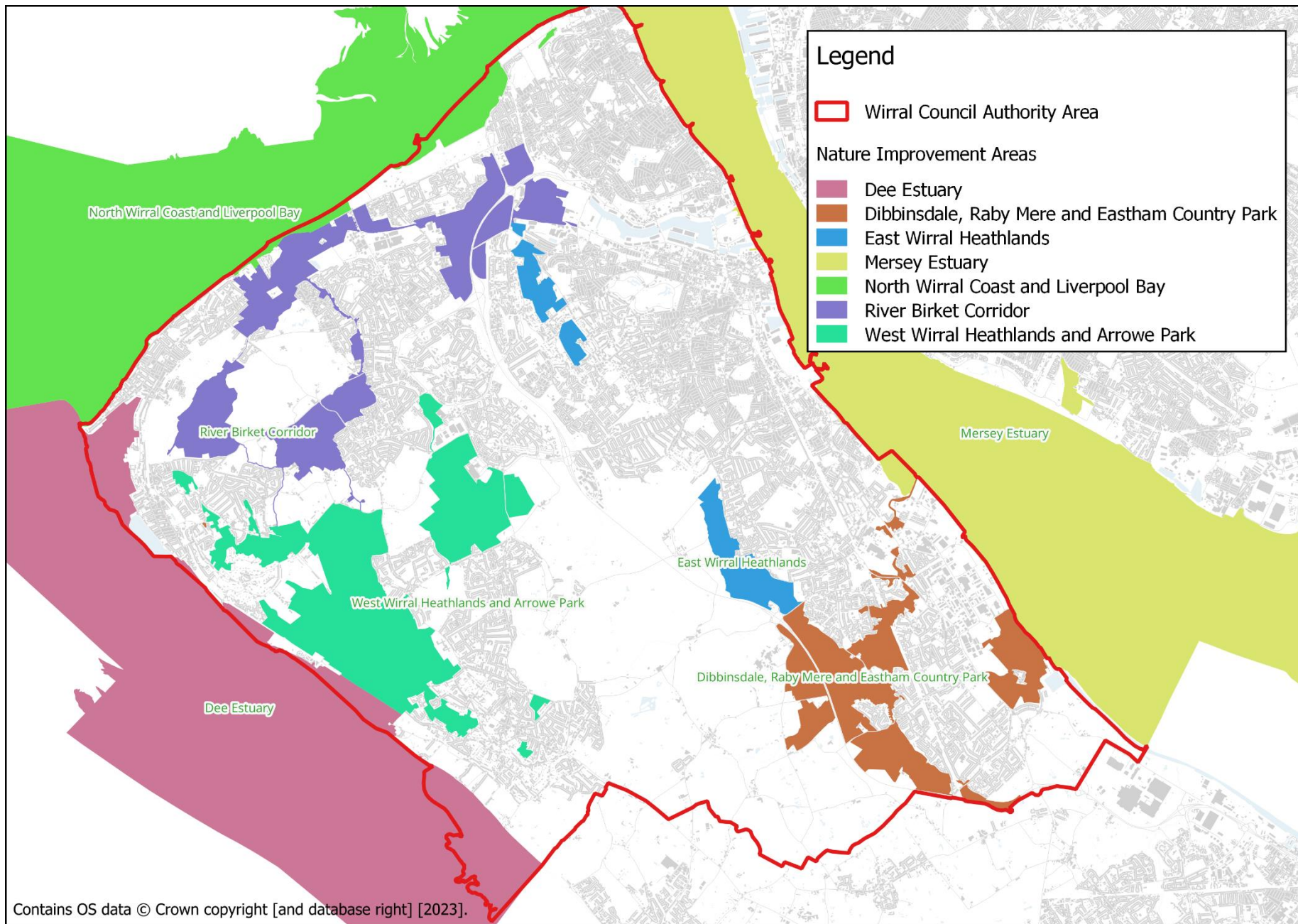


Figure 4: Nature Improvement Areas

KEY PRIORITIES

Our Common Home

All life on earth, including people, depends on our environment; the air, water, light and the soil beneath our feet, which itself is full of life. All life is linked, in complex webs called ecosystems. The reduction and loss of so many species is threatening the whole complex web of life, including us. This strategy aims to safeguard biodiversity and ensure the long-term survival of diverse plant and animal species.

The Council is committed to the preservation and enhancement of natural spaces such as woodlands, wetlands, meadows, heathlands, and coastal areas, recognising them as vital ecosystems that support a wide range of plant and animal species.

This Strategy will promote actions such as habitat restoration, invasive species management, and the creation of new reserves and protected areas. It prioritises the conservation of native flora and fauna, including the provision of suitable habitats for pollinators, birds, mammals, and other wildlife. The Council recognises the importance of ecological connectivity and the need to establish corridors that allow for the movement of species across fragmented landscapes. By promoting the creation of wildlife corridors and green infrastructure, the aim is to enhance biodiversity and enable species to adapt and thrive in the face of environmental challenges both now and in the future.

Ecosystem Services

Ecosystem services are the benefits that humans derive from nature and functioning ecosystems. These services, including provisioning, regulating, and cultural services, are vital for well-being and quality of life. Protecting and enhancing ecosystem services such as clean water, climate regulation, flood control, and recreation not only contribute to biodiversity conservation but also provide direct benefits to Wirral's communities. By prioritising ecosystem services, the Council recognises the importance of maintaining the functioning and integrity of natural systems to support both human and ecological well-being.

Delivering for biodiversity can support the following ecosystem services:

1. **Provisioning services:** Biodiversity supports the production of food, water, and other resources that are necessary for human well-being. For example, many species of plants and animals are used for food, medicines, and building materials.
2. **Regulating services:** Biodiversity helps to regulate ecosystem processes, such as climate regulation, water purification, and pollination. For example, wetlands can help to regulate water flows and reduce flooding, while bees and other pollinators are necessary for the pollination of crops and wildflowers.
3. **Cultural services:** Biodiversity is important for cultural and recreational activities, such as tourism, recreation, and education. For example, many people enjoy birdwatching, hiking, and other outdoor activities that rely on intact ecosystems. These contribute to improving physical and mental health.

Climate

Protecting Biodiversity can help mitigate the impacts of climate change, and addressing climate change help protect biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides.

Climate and biodiversity are often viewed as experiencing two separate crises. However, both are intrinsically linked as to their function, influence, and impact on the natural world. The focus of this strategy is to provide strategic links and commonalities between the priorities and objectives within both this strategy and Wirral's Climate Emergency Policy to ensure that any actions taken have a holistic approach. Biodiversity can provide resilience and adaptation to climate change through ecosystem services, as well as the ability to halt and reverse some of the effects many are already starting to experience.

Climate change can have direct and indirect effects on biodiversity. Direct effects include changes in temperature, rainfall, and extreme weather events, which can lead to changes in the distribution and abundance of species, as well as changes in the timing of seasonal events such as flowering and migration. Indirect effects include changes in the interactions between species, such as predator-prey relationships and competition for resources.

Biodiversity loss, on the other hand, can exacerbate climate change by reducing the capacity of ecosystems to store carbon and regulate the Earth's climate. Healthy ecosystems, such as woodlands and wetlands, are important sinks for carbon, and their destruction or degradation can release large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. Biodiversity loss can also reduce the resilience of ecosystems to the impacts of climate change, making them more vulnerable to disturbances such as droughts, floods, and wildfires.

People

People are a part of biodiversity, so an integral part of biodiversity conservation. Prioritising people in this strategy acknowledges the fundamental connection between human well-being and the natural world. Ensuring equitable access to nature and its benefits promotes social inclusion and enhances the overall quality of life for residents and their well-being.

The Council wants to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity and encourage individuals and communities to act. This will involve developing education programs and activities, as well as working with community groups and volunteers to deliver biodiversity projects. This will inspire curiosity in the natural world and inspire people and communities to take action to protect and conserve biodiversity for future generations.

Biodiversity also provides numerous benefits to human health and well-being. Access to green spaces, parks, and natural environments can improve mental health, reduce stress, and promote physical activity. Biodiversity-rich areas offer opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and connection with nature, contributing to overall well-being and quality of life.

Economy

Biodiversity and a healthy environment are essential for a sustainable and resilient economy. Sustainable management of natural resources, green infrastructure development, and natural tourism can generate economic opportunities while preserving and enhancing biodiversity. Integrating biodiversity considerations into economic decision-making can support socially and environmentally sustainable development. An example of the economic aspect of biodiversity is the potential for nature-based solutions that could drive green growth locally, provide local jobs and utilise innovative techniques and solutions. An inspiring example of this includes the Greater Manchester Wetlands Partnership:

The Greater Manchester Wetlands Partnership is a partnership of over 20 organisations delivering a landscape-scale community a natural heritage programme aiming to restore a nature recovery network of wildlife sites and corridors. By restoring and creating wetland habitats, the project not only enhances biodiversity and acts as a carbon sink but also attracts tourism, stimulating the local economy. It generates employment opportunities in conservation, tourism, and research while employing innovative techniques for natural flood management and water quality improvement. Furthermore, the initiative engages the community through educational and volunteer programs, promotes sustainable practices, and leverages a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure holistic wetland management. This partnership showcases the multifaceted benefits of nature-based solutions, intertwining environmental conservation with socio-economic development and innovative, sustainable practices.

Investing in biodiversity conservation and restoration can serve as natural infrastructure that provides essential services such as flood protection, water filtration, and climate regulation. Creating and/or enhancing natural habitats like wetlands and woodlands can reduce the need for costly engineered solutions. This can also support the economy by minimising expenses associated with infrastructure maintenance and repair.

KEY OBJECTIVES

Biodiversity Action Plan

OBJECTIVE 1 – TO ESTABLISH A BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN WHICH OUTLINES DELIVERABLE MEASURES TO SUPPORT PRIORITY HABITAT AND SPECIES TARGETS IN LINE WITH THE CITY REGION LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY AND FORTHCOMING PROTECTED SITE AND SPECIES STRATEGIES

Biodiversity Action Plan

The Council recognises the importance of developing a comprehensive Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) that will serve as a strategic roadmap, updating the existing BAP and guiding efforts to protect and promote biodiversity in Wirral. This will be developed within the first 12 months of this strategy being agreed.

To develop the BAP, the Council will undertake a comprehensive assessment of the local biodiversity, considering both the existing habitats and species as well as potential threats and challenges. This includes resources such as the forthcoming Local Nature Recovery strategy, Natural England's Protected Site and Species Strategies, the regional Ecological Network and Section 41 Priority Habitats Inventory. It will also access the large amounts of data held by local biological records centres, expert wildlife groups, other environmental stakeholders, and the local community to gather valuable insights and ensure inclusivity.

The BAP will encompass several key areas, addressing the diverse aspects of biodiversity conservation. It will focus on habitat restoration and creation, identifying priority sites for conservation and developing initiatives to protect and enhance them. Additionally, it will include measures to support and promote native species and their habitats and implementing targeted conservation actions.

Importantly, the BAP will also support the integration of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) principles into development processes. This will involve engaging with the Local Planning Authority, developers, and other stakeholders to encourage the incorporation of BNG measures in all relevant projects in line with prevailing BAP priorities and principles. The BAP will establish clear guidelines and incentives to promote biodiversity-friendly design and construction practices, ensuring that biodiversity is considered from the earliest stages of planning.

The BAP will serve as a communication tool, enabling the Council and partners to raise awareness among the public, local businesses, and organisations about the value of biodiversity and the role they can play in its conservation.

The BAP will also provide a framework for monitoring and evaluating the progress of biodiversity conservation and enhancement initiatives. It will measure the success of our actions, identify areas where adjustments are needed, and celebrate success. Regular reviews and updates of the BAP will ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness in meeting the evolving needs and challenges of biodiversity conservation.

Key areas include:

- mapping all priority habitats and species distribution across the borough and in their regional context
- increasing habitat provision,
- enhancing or expanding networks of habitat in target areas,
- species and site targeted management plans,
- connecting fragmented habitats and increasing ranges,
- invasive species management, and
- working with local experts through an established working group to identify and monitor progress of opportunities.

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP23) also sets out an expectation that all local authorities should have management plans in place by the end of 2023 to support their protected sites in reaching favourable status. This involves working proactively with Natural England and other to identify and implement actions needed to improve site conditions. This will either be incorporated into the BAP and/or be a supplementary document that aligns with the actions within it.

Biodiversity Net Gain

OBJECTIVE 2 – THE DELIVERY OF MANDATORY 10% BIODIVERSITY NET GAIN THROUGH THE PLANNING PROECSS IN ACCORDANCE WITH PREVAILING LEGISLATION, POLICY AND GUIDANCE

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is mandated by the National Planning Policy Framework and the Environment Act 2021 and is expected to come into force from January 2024 and April 2024 for 'Small Sites'. It is a key vehicle for promoting the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity through development projects.

Environment Act 2021

Wirral's Local Planning Authority has a duty to process planning applications in accordance with relevant BNG legislation, policy, and guidance.

Wirral Council Local Plan

It is the Council's responsibility to develop and maintain robust policies at a local level to ensure the delivery of BNG. Policies in Wirral's Local Plan 2021-2037 have been developed to facilitate the requirements of the Environment Act 2021. These provisions, including Policy WS5 – Strategy for Green and Blue Infrastructure, Open Space, Biodiversity and Landscape Protection and WD 3 – Biodiversity and Geodiversity, will ensure that all planning applications in Wirral will be determined against the principles of Biodiversity Net Gain and all necessary conditions required to satisfy this objective.

Planning Guidance

The Local Planning Authority will apply up to date national, regional, and local guidance when applying the local planning process and will expect developers to use publicly available guidance to inform their application. The Council's website will be updated accordingly to act as a signpost for developers to this guidance.

Early Engagement and Pre-Application Advice

Wirral's Local Planning Authority provides a chargeable pre-application service, which will include consideration of BNG. This will allow developers and applicants to engage with the Local Planning Authority at an early stage, providing an opportunity to seek guidance and advice on incorporating biodiversity considerations into their proposals. The pre-application service will support the early consideration of BNG, when integrated from the outset of the development process. By considering biodiversity early on, developers can explore innovative design solutions and mitigation measures that maximise biodiversity enhancements on-site. Advice from professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management is that early consideration of BNG may greatly reduce costs and improve opportunities.

Development of In-House Expertise

The Council and the Local Planning Authority has invested and will continue to invest in BNG training and building capacity to improve BNG outcomes. This includes the recruitment of an in-house ecologist to support the delivery of BNG. As a rapidly developing field, training and capacity building is a key priority to enable sustainable development to be delivered.

Development Management Processes

Wirral's Local Planning Authority will develop Development Management Processes to assess and determine planning applications where BNG is a consideration. This process involves integrating biodiversity considerations into the planning and development decision-making framework. Specific actions include updated validation checklists, approving BNG Statements and Plans, validating BNG Metric calculations, considering BNG planning conditions or obligations, as well as developing BNG monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Purposeful Habitat Degradation

The Environment Act 2021 prevents intentional clearing of development sites to lower the biodiversity baseline (to achieve more easily 10% BNG), by stating, the baseline or “pre-development” date against which BNG metrics are calculated must be before any activity which has lowered the biodiversity value since 30th January 2020. Therefore, the Environment Act 2021 prevents deliberate lowering of baselines for development. Where this occurs, the Local Planning Authority will require the BNG metric to be re-calculated to a date before purposeful degradation (up to 30th January 2020). This will be based on available evidence such as local biological records and aerial imagery. In this instance, a precautionary approach by those undertaking the calculations will be applied when assigning condition scores in the absence of contrary evidence. The Council and the Local Planning Authority are committed to applying this principle.

Creating Habitat Banks

The Council has the potential to play a key role in developing habitat banks for the sale of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Units. Habitat banks are designed to offset the ecological impacts of development where it cannot be achieved on-site, by creating, restoring, or enhancing habitats that provide equivalent or greater ecological value (dependant on development need). These habitats can be conserved and managed in-house or entrusted to third-party organisations. The sites would be subject to BNG metric assessments, have a Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan, and be secured via legal agreement (e.g., S106 or Conservation Covenant). They can then be registered on the BNG Register which will be administered by Natural England, from which the units can be allocated when the development need arises. By establishing habitat banks, the Council can actively contribute to achieving and controlling BNG targets and delivery within Wirral.

Developing habitat banks also provides a mechanism for the Council to generate funding by selling BNG Units to developers who require biodiversity offsets. These funds will be ring fenced for the management of that habitat bank over a 30-year period. Maintaining control through this mechanism will allow for better strategic planning and coordination of biodiversity initiatives in Wirral, helping to ensure that they are done where they are needed most. However, the Council cannot mandate or direct developers to purchase BNG Units from Council owned habitat banks in preference to other ecologically suitable suppliers and is expected to manage associated conflicts of interest.

Creating a Local Site Register

In addition to the Natural England site register, the Council's aim is to develop a local site register for local habitat banks and BNG Unit providers. The register will enable the Council to identify potential sites for biodiversity offsetting, prioritise conservation efforts, and engage with habitat bank providers for the sale and transfer of BNG Units more efficiently.

Communication and Engagement

OBJECTIVE 3 – TO PROMOTE AWARENESS OF BIODIVERSITY, SUPPORTING AND ENCOURAGING POSITIVE ACTION FROM COMMUNITIES, BUSINESSES AND ORGANISATIONS IN WIRRAL.

Communications and Engagement

The Council recognises that effective communication and engagement is essential for biodiversity action. This objective aims to foster awareness, understanding, and active participation among Wirral's community members, stakeholders, and partners in biodiversity conservation and the implementation of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).

By developing and implementing a robust communication plan, the Council aims to raise awareness about the importance of biodiversity and the benefits it provides to communities in Wirral, such as improved air and water quality, enhanced ecosystem services, and a healthier and more resilient environment. This involves actively engaging with residents, businesses, schools, community groups, and other stakeholders to inform, educate, and inspire action.

Engagement efforts will involve various activities, such as:

- local and social media publications,
- updates via the Council website,
- public consultations,
- public biodiversity workshops,
- using museums and libraries to host events,
- providing information boards in Wirral's green spaces,
- working with the many expert wildlife groups in Wirral to support and co-ordinate their activities,
- including residents and communities in environmental projects,
- recognise and support the many people that support biodiversity in Wirral and help recruit the 'next generation',
- biodiversity awareness campaigns, and
- educational programmes.

The Council will celebrate success by highlighting good practice through local media, biodiversity-related news, and promoting opportunities for involvement. Social media platforms, website resources, and community events provide opportunities to reach a wider audience and encourage active participation.

By nurturing a connection to nature and a shared responsibility for biodiversity, the Council can encourage individuals and organisations to contribute to biodiversity conservation through actions such as creating wildlife-friendly habitats, supporting local biodiversity initiatives, and incorporating biodiversity considerations in their own practices and projects.

Developing a Biodiversity Toolkit

To empower Wirral's residents and communities to actively participate in biodiversity conservation efforts the Council will develop a biodiversity toolkit that provides residents with the necessary resources, guidance, and support to take action and make a positive impact on local biodiversity.

The toolkit will serve as an educational tool, raising awareness about the value of biodiversity, the challenges it faces, and the actions individuals can take to contribute to its conservation. By providing accessible information and practical tips, the toolkit will empower residents to understand the role they play in protecting and enhancing biodiversity within their own neighbourhoods and gardens.

The toolkit will provide practical guidance on specific actions that all residents and communities can undertake to create wildlife-friendly habitats in their schools and gardens, targeted actions for native species, and promote sustainable practices such as rainwater harvesting. It will offer step-by-step instructions, best practices, and examples of successful initiatives, inspiring residents to get involved and make a tangible difference.

Biodiversity in Everything That We Do

OBJECTIVE 4 – EMBED THE BIODIVERSITY OBJECTIVE IN ALL THAT WE DO IN WIRRAL COUNCIL.
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The Council has a duty to embed the consideration of biodiversity in all of its functions.

This will be achieved by:

- Policy integration – integrating biodiversity considerations into policy and decision-making processes across relevant departments by maintaining and communicating corporate wide biodiversity objectives, targets, and principles. This includes departments such as Planning, Development Management, Highways and Infrastructure, Procurement, and Parks and Gardens.
- Staff training and awareness – providing training and raising awareness amongst council officers about the importance of biodiversity and its integrations into their respective services and roles. This will include service specific workshops and the development of a Biodiversity Literacy course which will provide an overview on biodiversity and provide practical guidance on incorporating biodiversity considerations into everyday tasks.
- Biodiversity Impact Assessments – developing and implementing biodiversity impact assessments into the decision-making process in Wirral. This includes conducting assessments to identify potential impacts of Council proposals, projects, strategies and policies and measures to avoid or minimise negative impacts or enhance biodiversity.
- Biodiversity Champions – appointing biodiversity champions within relevant departments to help drive the integration of biodiversity considerations. These officers can advocate for biodiversity, provide guidance to colleagues, and champion biodiversity initiatives within their respective departments.

Be An Exemplar of Best Practice

OBJECTIVE 5 – TO MAXIMISE THE POTENTIAL FROM THE COUNCIL’S ESTATE TO SUPPORT BIODIVERSITY WHILST BALANCING THEIR MULTIFUNCTIONAL NEEDS.
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Being an exemplar of best practice on the Council’s managed estate is important for the delivery of the Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy. It sets a positive example for other landowners and demonstrates the commitment of the Council to conserving and enhancing biodiversity. By showcasing successful biodiversity initiatives on Wirral’s managed estate, it can inspire and encourage other stakeholders, such as businesses, community groups, and individuals, to take similar actions in their own land management practices.

The Council will undertake an assessment of the current biodiversity status of it’s estate to identify areas for intervention, improvement, conservation, and enhancement. This will draw on the extensive expertise and data already held by various groups in Wirral. The Council will undertake mapping exercise to identify any unknown habitats and more detailed site surveys, where required, to understand the status of key and notable species. It is anticipated that this will form part of the baseline assessment necessary for developing the Biodiversity Action Plan and any relevant actions captured within it. Any actions that sit outside of the Biodiversity Action Plan will be managed in either site specific management plans and/or related strategies.

Once the assessment is complete, this will allow the Council to identify measures to enhance and protect biodiversity. This may include habitat restoration and creation projects, promoting native plant species, implementing sustainable land management practices, and creating wildlife corridors. Additionally, biodiversity-friendly management practices, such as reducing pesticide use, composting, and promoting organic land management could be adopted to ensure a healthy and thriving ecosystem.

Key areas for consideration include:

- allotments
- cemeteries
- parks and sports fields
- amenity spaces and communal gardens
- roadside verges
- field margins and hedgerows
- rights of way and access routes
- woodlands and nature reserves

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
- Local Wildlife Sites
- rivers, ponds, and other watercourses
- water-dependent habitats
- estuaries and coastal habitats
- brownfield/contaminated sites

Development and Regeneration

To demonstrate best practice, the Council will ensure key biodiversity principles are embedded in its own development and regeneration projects in Wirral, in compliance with prevailing legislation and guidance.

The Council will ensure that all of its development projects undergo robust and comprehensive ecological and biodiversity assessments at early planning stages and will deliver BNG commitments in accordance with the British Standard (BS 8683: Process for designing and implementing biodiversity net gain – specification), best practice principles, and the BNG Metric User Guidance. These assessments will identify the existing biodiversity features on-site and evaluate any potential impacts. The Council will prioritise the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity through iterative development and landscape design and applying the mitigation hierarchy in decision making. This can be achieved by conserving and enhancing existing site biodiversity, creating new priority and targeted habitats, and establishing wildlife corridors to connect fragmented ecosystems. The Council will also consider species-specific actions that support local wildlife populations, especially those at risk.

In addition, the Council will prioritise sustainable construction practices and green infrastructure in its projects. This includes utilising sustainable building materials, implementing energy-efficient measures, and promoting the use of renewable energy sources. Green infrastructure features such as green spaces, urban woodlands, and wildlife corridors, can create new habitats that support local biodiversity and enhance ecological connectivity.

By implementing robust BNG and integrating early biodiversity considerations, the Council will demonstrate its commitment to sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. These actions will contribute to the overall enhancement and preservation of biodiversity in Wirral, aligning with the broader Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy objectives.

Local Expertise and Knowledge

OBJECTIVE 6 – TO IDENTIFY AND HARNESS THE WEALTH OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE TO IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES AND SOLUTIONS TO LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ISSUES.

The Council will harness local expertise to support biodiversity by actively engaging with local communities, organisations, and individuals who possess knowledge and passion for biodiversity conservation in Wirral. The Council will establish partnerships and collaborate with local environmental and conservation groups, local universities, and research institutions to tap into their local expertise and resources.

The Council will seek to re-establish suitable forums to enable information exchange with the various wildlife groups in Wirral and other experts.

The Council will organise workshops, forums, and training sessions to gather input and insights from local experts, recognising that most biodiversity data is gathered by expert volunteers and groups. By involving residents, volunteers, and community groups, this will leverage their knowledge of the local ecosystems, species, and habitats to identify priority habitats and species for inclusion in the Biodiversity Action Plan and ongoing biodiversity activities. This collaborative approach will ensure that strategic biodiversity objectives, conservation plans, and initiatives are tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of their area, while also fostering a sense of ownership and engagement within the community.

INVESTMENT AND DELIVERY

The Council is facing unprecedented financial challenges and it is important that all activities and initiatives emerging from this Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy are assessed based on their context, available resources, and expected outcomes. This will require innovative funding models that can alleviate any pressures on the Council whilst delivery biodiversity outcomes for Wirral. This will require a mixed delivery model, including:

1. **Grants and Funding:** The Council can apply for grants and funding from various government and non-governmental organisations, such as the National Lottery Community Fund, the Heritage Fund, and the Woodland Trust. These grants can be used to fund a range of initiatives, including habitat restoration, species conservation, and educational programmes.
2. **Public-Private Partnership (PPP):** The Council can enter into a PPP with private businesses or investors to fund Biodiversity initiatives. Under this model, the private partner provides financial support and expertise, while the Council provides the land and resources required for the initiative. This model can be used to fund initiatives such as habitat restoration, species conservation, and green infrastructure development.
3. **Biodiversity Bonds:** Biodiversity bonds are a relatively new and untested model for the Council. These bonds are similar to traditional bonds, but the proceeds are used to finance biodiversity projects such as habitat restoration, species conservation, and green infrastructure development. Investors receive a return on their investment (including impact returns), while the local authority receives the funding required for the initiative.
4. **Crowdfunding:** The Council and its partners could use crowdfunding platforms to raise funds for biodiversity initiatives. Crowdfunding allows individuals and organisations to contribute small amounts of money to fund a project. It's anticipated that this model can be used to fund a range of smaller, local initiatives.
5. **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** Many organisations have CSR and environmental commitments and priorities as part of their strategies and Environmental Management System. The Council can partner with companies that have a CSR focus on biodiversity to fund

biodiversity initiatives. Organisations can provide financial support and expertise, while the Council provides the land and resources required for the initiative.

6. **Biodiversity Net Gain Units:** The sale of BNG units can provide a source of ring-fenced funding, which can be used to fund registered biodiversity conservation and enhancement projects. Where a developer cannot achieve BNG onsite, they can offset the biodiversity impacts of their projects by funding biodiversity conservation and enhancement projects offsite via Habitat Banks.

LOCAL INITIATIVES

The Council, environmental organisation, communities and many volunteer groups are already contributing to positive outcomes for biodiversity, dedicated to leaving the environment in a better state than it was found. The Council wants to support, encourage and harness this people power to deliver a more biodiverse borough both now and for future generations to come. Learning from this wealth of experience and best practice can inspire the development of future biodiversity initiatives in Wirral. Some notable schemes include:

New Ferry Butterfly Park

New Ferry Butterfly Park stands as a beacon of community-led conservation efforts, transforming a once barren wasteland into a vibrant urban nature reserve since its inception in the 1990s. Led by the local community and the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, the park now flourishes with diverse habitats such as wildflower meadows, woodlands, and ponds, fostering a rich ecosystem inhabited by a variety of butterfly species and other wildlife. The site not only serves as a refuge for various species but has also developed into a vital educational hub, promoting environmental awareness through workshops and events. As a testament to the power of community collaboration and conservation, the park has positively influenced the local area, offering a green space for individuals to reconnect with nature and playing a crucial role in urban wildlife conservation.

No Mow May

The "No Mow May" initiative, is a campaign spearheaded by Plantlife, encouraging individuals and organisations to refrain from mowing grass areas during the month of May. This was adopted by the Council in 2021 to foster biodiversity and support pollinator populations by providing them with increased habitats and food sources. This had positive outcomes such as promoting a richer biodiversity, supporting crucial pollinators, enhancing public awareness about environmental conservation, and contributing to carbon sequestration. It also reduced lawn and verge maintenance, supported community engagement, and offered opportunities for scientific research and education on local ecosystems. This simple yet impactful initiative not only aids in creating vibrant habitats for various wildlife by allowing the natural growth of wildflowers and other flora.

Wirral Country Park

Wirral Country Park is widely regarded as the first Country Park in Britain. A draft scheme for the construction of Wirral Country Park was prepared in 1968 and was officially opened in 1973. While the park had a number of already established natural areas – several areas were reclaimed and returned to nature.

The Wirral Way, a former railway line, provides a wildlife corridor extending along the west Wirral peninsula. Wildflower species attract invertebrates whilst the hedgerows provide food and shelter for small mammals and birds. The recent Wirral Way Widening schemes have also encouraged diversity through maintenance of a grass/wildflower edge along the surfaced pedestrian/cycle route.

Historical land use has left a legacy of marl and brick pits and, at Dawpool, the landfill site has become an area of mixed scrub and grassland. The meadow restoration project has restored many wildflower species that had been lost to unmanaged grassland both here and along the Wirral Way. Wirral Country Parks Meadow Restoration Project was recognised with a 2020 Bees' Needs Champions Award.

Wildflower Verges

In 2021/22, 7.3 Hectares of amenity space and highway verges were identified as rewilding sites, meaning that they would no longer be mown regularly, apart from edges and footpaths, in order that they provide habitats for pollinators and insects. These areas only received one cut during the autumn to prevent areas becoming unmanageable.

Pollinator Areas

In 2021/22, 59 areas were identified as being potentially pollinator friendly. Designated Pollinator sites are left to grow and were managed to encourage the development of the naturally occurring wildflowers identified.

IMPACT AND LEGACY

Performance Monitoring Framework

Developing a robust monitoring framework is vital for tracking progress towards achieving the objectives of this strategy. It sets out the Council's approach for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the performance of Biodiversity & Net Gain measures and actions, to assess effectiveness and identify further opportunities. Performance monitoring will inform future decision-making and policy development, as well as to communicate progress to various stakeholders, such as the public, elected members, and community organisations. The key performance indicators for this strategy include:

1. The establishment of a Biodiversity Action Working Group including local stakeholders, representatives, and experts.
2. The development of a Biodiversity Action plan within 12 months of the Biodiversity & Net Gain Strategy being agreed and published.
3. The number of new wildlife habitats created or enhanced, such as woodlands, meadows, or wetlands.
4. Proportion of designated sites in unfavourable and favourable condition (declining and recovering).
5. Area of designated sites taken from unfavourable condition to recovering or favourable condition.
6. The area of land brought into effective conservation management in the reporting period, including the proportion of sites that meet conservation targets (e.g., priority habitats & species etc.).
7. The number of people engaged in biodiversity conservation activities, such as volunteering, education, or awareness-raising.
8. The level of investment in biodiversity conservation measures, including resources allocated to ongoing management.
9. The number of planning applications subject to biodiversity net gain requirements.
10. The total net gain of biodiversity in Wirral (total BNG Unit uplift vs. baseline for all development projects).
11. The total net gain of biodiversity for Wirral Council regeneration projects.
12. The total number and type of net gain units created in Wirral.
13. Developing and maintaining a record of on-site and off-site net gain delivery.
14. The number of registered, validated biodiversity net gain offsetting sites in Wirral.
15. The proportion of local authority land managed to conserve and enhance biodiversity.

16. The amount of carbon sequestered or stored by biodiversity-enhancing activities, such as tree planting.
17. The number of partnerships established or collaborations with stakeholders to support biodiversity conservation and enhancement.
18. % of Council officers completing the 'Biodiversity Literacy' course.
19. The level of awareness and understanding of biodiversity issues among council officers and elected members (questionnaire pre and post biodiversity literacy course and/or similar workshop/training).

The Performance Monitoring Framework will be managed and maintained by the Biodiversity & Net Gain Working Group and will be reported on an annual basis.