

REPORT TITLE: NATURE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

10 SEPTEMBER 2025

REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER: Cllr Kelsie Learney, Cabinet Member for the Climate and Nature Emergency

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WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

The council recognises the critical importance of protecting and enhancing the natural environment of the district and is determined to reverse the long-term decline in nature and biodiversity. Protecting our natural environment and tackling the ongoing nature emergency remains a central priority within the Council Plan. Building on the foundations of the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), the council is now moving to a more ambitious, district-wide strategic approach through the proposed Nature Improvement Plan 2025–2030 (NIP).

The NIP provides, for the first time, a comprehensive framework for nature recovery in the Winchester district. It has been shaped by national legislation and policy, alongside the council's own strategies, particularly the Winchester City Council Biodiversity Action Plan 2021. The successes and lessons learnt, through the BAP over the last four years have directly informed the aims and objectives of this new plan, ensuring it reflects both local experience and national best practice.

The overarching aim of the NIP is to halt and reverse the decline in nature and biodiversity by actively promoting and delivering nature improvement and recovery across the district. This responds to the council's declaration of a nature emergency and reflects the strengthened biodiversity duty set out in the Environment Act 2021.

To focus collective effort and resources, the NIP sets out five new clear pathways for action:

1. Protect and manage land for nature
2. Create new spaces for nature
3. Deliver more nature-based solutions for tackling climate change
4. Prevent and control pollution better
5. Connect more people to nature

For each pathway, measures have been identified where possible. Two sets of measures will be monitored between 2025 and 2030: one for council actions on land it owns and manages, and one for actions delivered across the wider district. Progress will be reviewed annually through Action Plans for both the council land and the district as a whole.

Guiding principles have also been established to ensure that biodiversity is embedded across all council functions, particularly in areas where numerical targets cannot be applied.

The NIP therefore marks an important next step. It supersedes the BAP and sets out a bold, strategic approach for achieving meaningful nature recovery across the Winchester district. By working together with communities, partners and stakeholders, the council is committed to delivering real and lasting improvements for biodiversity and the natural environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That cabinet:

1. Adopt the Winchester District Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030 technical document.
2. Delegate authority to the Corporate Head of Economy and Community to create and publish a resident and partner facing executive summary setting out the nature improvement priorities and key areas of delivery.

IMPLICATIONS:1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

1.1 Greener Faster

1.2 The Winchester District Nature Improvement Plan 2025- 2030 (Appendix A) will help reverse the long-term decline in nature and biodiversity. The Council recognises the vital connection between the climate and nature emergencies and is committed to addressing them both in tandem.

1.3 Healthy Communities

1.4 The Nature Improvement Plan includes measures and principles regarding land and water management and running of open spaces, as well as events. Providing access to nature, water, rivers and green spaces can improve health and wellbeing and aid participation in physical activities.

1.5 The plan will also be delivered in part through collaborating and enabling various partners and community groups.

1.6 The Plan should be accessible to a wide audience and easily understood no matter a readers' level of knowledge about land management, ecology and biodiversity. A public facing executive summary will include key content from the technical document, along with delivery priorities and project opportunities. Its presentation, will make it more accessible and inclusive, ensuring residents are fully able to engage with the Plan and what it is seeking to achieve. A short film will explain and promote the plan. This supports the council's Listen and Learn and Effective and Efficient priorities by ensuring that information about our services is easy to access, people know how to they can get involved and groups that might not already engage in this area of work have the ability to do so.

2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

2.1 The Plan will be delivered with the existing ecology team budgets. No further resources are required at this stage.

2.2 To pursue future projects or actions further resources may be required at that time and will be subject to future decisions. The ecology team will pursue opportunities for funding where available.

3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

3.1 The Environment Act 2021 introduced a strengthened 'biodiversity duty' which requires public authorities to:

- Consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Agree policies and specific objectives based on their consideration.

- Act to deliver their policies and achieve objectives.
- 3.2 In addition to the above, the Environment Act requires public authorities to produce a report on what they are doing and how they are complying with this biodiversity duty. The report must also include details of biodiversity net gains.
 - 3.3 The Nature Improvement Plan will be the reporting framework which demonstrates how the council is meeting the strengthened Biodiversity Duty, including reporting back on the work the council undertakes for Biodiversity Net Gain.
 - 3.4 Any procurement of works for land management, biodiversity improvement activity will be compliant with the council's Contract Procedure Rules and applicable external legislation. Service Level Agreement with agencies carrying out land management, survey or monitoring on behalf of the council will be subject to regular review to ensure the council is still achieving best value reviews and have the appropriate legal agreement in place.
 - 3.5 There is an existing grounds maintenance contract with IDVerde which will be used for appropriate works.
 - 3.6 The NIP principles, if adopted, will be included in the council's Sustainable Procurement Guide which is published to help contractors and suppliers bid for work from the council.

4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Plan has been developed and will be delivered with the current resourcing in the ecology team. This consists of two officers: a Principal Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer and an Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer. Other resources can be deployed from within the service and teams within the Sustainability and Natural Environment Team in support of projects and services that bring co-benefits, for example trees, play areas, carbon saving and climate adaptation.

5 PROPERTY AND ASSET IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The NIP does consider how council land could be managed to increase nature recovery and bio-diversity gain, which may include altering or changing current practices or uses. There could also be the opportunity to stack benefits such as nutrient and carbon credits, that have the potential to be traded commercially to support future council (or private sector) development.

6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 The proposal and scope to update the Biodiversity Action Plan was taken to Health and Environment Policy Committee on 3 December 2024. Comments provided were incorporated into the draft plan. The Draft Nature Improvement Plan (NIP) was then taken to Health and Environment Policy Committee on 3

July 2025 for further comments and feedback. This has been updated to incorporate feedback, in particular to:

- Make the document more of a celebration of Winchester's biodiversity
- Add clarity around data sources and assumptions, and how these have informed the measures
- Refer to ecosystem services and climate resilience
- Make more of the opportunities for SINC's and other future aspirational work areas coming out of the NIP after 2025/2026.
- Check whether the plan can be more aspirational but still achievable - clarify the limitations of the Plan.

6.2 Neighbouring Local Authority ecologists, including the ecologist at SDNP have been consulted, as have the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. None of these external partners raised any concerns.

7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 The Nature Improvement Plan 2025- 2030 (Appendix A) sets out the strategic approach to nature improvement across the whole district. This addresses the commitments made when the council declared a nature emergency and the strengthened biodiversity duty in the Environment Act 2021.

8 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken (Appendix B).

9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 None required

10 RISK MANAGEMENT

10.1 The table below considers the risks, mitigation and opportunities related to the Nature Improvement Plan.

Risk	Mitigation	Opportunities
Financial Exposure - None		
Exposure to challenge	Consultation with HEP Committee and external partners including Hampshire and Isle of Wight	Strategic approach with robust mechanism for reporting back on measures and meeting monitoring requirements

Risk	Mitigation	Opportunities
	<p>Wildlife Trust (HIWWT), South Downs National Park (SDNP) Ecologist and other neighbouring authority Ecology Teams.</p> <p>Work on the NIP has been carried out alongside working with Hampshire County Council on the production of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LRNS) and aligns with it.</p>	<p>under the Environment Act 2021.</p> <p>Increased opportunities for engagement through delivery of the plan.</p>
Innovation	New practices and techniques to improve nature could be explored, particularly new digital and technology approaches for monitoring and reporting.	
Reputation - Failing to address the nature emergency or meet duties under the Environment Act 2021.	The plan provides a mechanism for delivering measurable nature improvements on council land and across the entire district.	Aligns with the delivery of the Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
Achievement of outcome	Reviews will be undertaken, and annual action plans will be developed to ensure measures are delivered over the five-year period of the plan.	Potential for additional benefits to ecosystem services, health and wellbeing and climate resilience.
Property Changes to land management practices and uses are not supported	The NIP sets out the outputs and benefits to be gained to justify any changes. It can be used to underpin decisions that can be	Opportunity to trade BGN, nutrient or carbon credits

Risk	Mitigation	Opportunities
	taken in balance with other objectives.	
Community Support Lack of understanding or awareness of the plan could undermine support for it.	A resident-facing executive summary document will be published following approval of the NIP technical document. A launch film will be produced and the council website updated. A communications plan will be developed to support delivery of the plan which will include various engagement activities with stakeholders such as events and forums.	Increased awareness of the existing positive work undertaken by the council. Increased local participation and action to improve nature in local communities.
Timescales Achieving outcomes and reaching our aims over a long period requires sustained effort and resources	Provided the plan is approved by Cabinet, it will be launched in September.	
Project capacity A small delivery team can be impacted by changes and completing priorities	The wider service can help to support projects, and the use of external partners and stakeholder can fill capacity gaps.	Greater empowerment of local stakeholders and community groups to take action can increase project capacity.
Other Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) may affect the delivery of the later stages of the plan	The plan clearly sets out priorities and measures for nature improvement so these can be carried forward with LGR.	Devolution may increase the opportunity for investment and increased strategic approach to nature improvement.

11. SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

11.1. Background

11.2. The Nature Improvement Plan 2025- 2030 (Appendix A) is a technical document that for the first time sets out the strategic approach to reversing the

decline in nature by actively seeking enhancement and improvement across the whole district. This addresses the commitments made when the council declared a nature emergency and the strengthened biodiversity duty in the Environment Act 2021.

- 11.3. The Health and Environment Policy Committee noted and commented on the proposed scope of the Draft Nature Improvement Plan (NIP) at its 3 December 2024 meeting and provided further feedback on the Draft NIP at its 3 July 2025 meeting, which has been incorporated in the latest version of the plan.
- 11.4. Details of the Proposal
- 11.5. The NIP outlines a set of ambitious yet achievable measures and guiding principles for enhancing biodiversity, both on council-owned land and across the wider district. These measures align with national biodiversity goals and, where possible, exceeds them reflecting the district's rich natural assets and ecological potential. Halting the biodiversity decline in the Winchester district would be a significant and momentous achievement, with seeking recovery and improvement as the ambitious next step.
- 11.6. The Nature Improvement Plan has been informed by various important existing council documents as well as national policy and legislation. Particularly the Winchester City Council Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) 2021, of which the successes and lessons learnt over the last four years have shaped this next step and helped determine the aims and objectives of the Nature Improvement Plan. The NIP contains highlights of the BAP biodiversity achievements from 2021 to 2025. Learning from the projects that have led to successful reversal of biodiversity loss provides a model by which new opportunities will be identified and developed.
- 11.7. The aim of the NIP is to promote and achieve nature improvement and recovery across the Winchester district. Five new pathways have been identified under which delivery and projects can be coordinated:
 - I. Protect and manage land for nature
 - II. Create new spaces for nature
 - III. Deliver more nature-based solutions for tackling climate change
 - IV. Prevent and control pollution better
 - V. Connect more people to nature
- 11.8. These five pathways provide a mechanism for setting measures and prioritising actions. Rather than focusing on specific habitats and species as in the BAP, these pathways have a stronger link to the Council Plan and Carbon Neutrality Action Plan (CNAP) and set the parameters for achieving the overarching aim of nature improvement and recovery across the district.

- 11.9. Measures have been set where possible for each of the identified pathways. The measures are ambitious but achievable and were determined through internal cross service officer engagement and baseline assessment of certain designated sites and habitats. They are also in accordance with national targets set out in the Environment Improvement Plan 2023, although they are not always directly comparable due to availability and accuracy of data. These measures will be monitored over the life of the Plan through various approaches and techniques, and will be reported at appropriate intervals and times applicable to the type of measure.
- 11.10. There will be two sets of measures for 2025-2030, one for council-based actions on council owned and managed land, and one for district wide actions (as set out in table 6 and 7 of the NIP), and shown below.

Council Land 2030 Measures		
1	Protect and manage land for nature	1.1 100% of SSSI units achieving “favourable/unfavourable-recovering” condition
		1.2 100% SINCs in favourable management
		1.3 Achieve a minimum of 27.61% of WCC land managed for nature
2	Create new spaces for nature	2.1 1 ha new green or blue habitat created or improved for nature
		2.2 500m hedgerow planted for nature
		2.3 250 swift boxes and 50 bat roost features installed on council properties
3	Deliver more nature-based solutions	3.1 Additional carbon sequestered on 3 sites
4	Prevent and control pollution better	4.1 10 Wastewater Treatment Works on council land upgraded to reduce nitrogen and phosphorous loading
5	Connect more people to nature	5.1 10,000 volunteer hours of nature conservation activities on our land
		5.2 20 events on WCC land which promote connection with nature (health and wellbeing)

District 2030 Measures		
1	Protect and manage land for nature	1.1 Support the Solent Waders & Brent Goose Strategy and protect the sites included
		1.2 Deliver a minimum of 88% of SSSIs units in the district achieving “favourable/unfavourable-recovering” condition
		1.3 Maintain the achievement of a minimum of 61% SINC's (surveyed in last 10 years) under positive management
		1.4 Achieve a minimum of 12.48% land designated for nature
2	Create new spaces for nature	2.1 Discharge Biodiversity Gain Plans via Development Management to deliver habitat creation and enhancement of 500 biodiversity units
		2.2 100 biodiversity units secured through signing agreements with habitat banks
		2.3 10ha of natural green or blue space created
3	Deliver more nature-based solutions	3.1 Sustain Tree canopy/woodland cover above 22.991%
4	Prevent and control pollution better	4.1 Continue to deliver the council's nutrient mitigation strategy.
5	Connect more people to nature	5.1 50 farmers and land managers supported with nature-friendly practices
		5.2 5 businesses supported with nature-based projects
		5.3 6 nature events/forums delivered
		5.4 Grants given to nature conservation groups to create spaces for nature and connect people to nature
		5.5 4 partnerships collaborated with to deliver 5 restoration projects
		5.6 10 community groups collaborated with to deliver nature conservation activities
		5.7 10 event/programmes delivered through partners which promote connection with nature (health and wellbeing)

11.11. A Council Land Nature Improvement Action Plan and District Nature Improvement Action Plan will be developed to track progress against the five-year measures. 2025/2026 versions of the two action plans are provided in

Appendix C of the NIP. Progress against these action plans will be reported to the council at the appropriate time with reports published on the council website to inform the future priorities and actions.

- 11.12. The NIP establishes a set of guiding principles in relation to the way in which the council will deliver actions and work with others to improve nature and increase biodiversity. These provide a consistent framework to help ensure decisions align with aims and long-term goals of the NIP, reducing the risk of reactive or contradictory approaches. This will also give clarity to partners and contractors as to the standard to follow, particularly for areas of work where numerical targets are not applicable.

PRINCIPLE 1	BIODIVERSITY DUTY
	Consider biodiversity and nature improvement and recovery in all functions and decisions in accordance with the strengthened biodiversity duty in the Environment Act. The council expects all partners and contractors to consider biodiversity in all their actions relating to council buildings, land or projects.
PRINCIPLE 2	HIERARCHY OF SITES
	<p>We will endeavour to follow the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites (as described in section 3.1), and prioritise actions which improve sites of greatest importance.</p> <p>The council will pursue opportunities for nature improvement and recovery on un-designated sites, but the priority will be to protect, maintain and enhance important designated sites.</p>
PRINCIPLE 3	CHEMICAL USE
	<p>Pesticides and herbicides will only be used on biodiversity sites where considered absolutely necessary, for example to remove invasive species.</p> <p>We will strive to reduce herbicide, pesticide and non-organic chemical fertiliser use, on all council owned sites by 2030.</p>
PRINCIPLE 4	WATER USE & WATER QUALITY
	<p>Minimise water use and introduce water recycling methods and sustainable drainage solutions where possible, as part of projects, development or land management practices.</p> <p>Recognise the importance of appropriately managing land within buffer zones (5m to ditches and 10m to rivers) and controlling activities within these buffer areas which have the potential to cause pollution to watercourses.</p>
PRINCIPLE 5	BIOSECURITY
	Follow biosecurity best practices guidelines and remove invasive and non-native species (INNS) from council owned land.

	The removal of other species (not included on the INNS list e.g. Hogweed or nettles) will not be a priority and will only be undertaken where considered a health and safety risk, or their removal is necessary in accordance with the relevant management plan.
PRINCIPLE 6	MULTIPLE BENEFITS
	<p>Consideration will be given to the combination of benefits, and ecosystem services, which can be delivered through land management, development or specific projects, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to biodiversity • Improvements to ecosystem services such as pollination, clean air production, water purification and flood alleviation • Delivery of nature-based solutions for tackling climate change such as increased carbon sequestration and urban greening • Improvements to health and wellbeing • Better access to nature, open space and recreation <p>Where possible these benefits should be stacked to ensure the best outcomes are delivered.</p>
PRINCIPLE 7	PARTNERSHIP WORKING
	The council will work in partnership with external stakeholders and established community groups to meet the 2030 measures.
PRINCIPLE 8	HAMPSHIRE NATURE RECOVERY
	Ensure that all work contributes towards the delivery of the Hampshire Nature Recovery Strategy by prioritising opportunities included within the “measures map”. This will provide a guide for where and how to deliver improvements for nature on a landscape scale, and create bigger, better, more joined up spaces for nature. (Local Nature Recovery Strategies are explained further in Appendix B).
PRINCIPLE 9	PROTECTED SPECIES
	<p>Support the delivery of species recovery strategies, referenced in the Environment Act 2021 and LNRS, as they emerge.</p> <p>Species will be considered and mitigation and enhancements sought in all areas of relevant work from management of biodiversity sites and open spaces to property maintenance and development management. This will be in accordance with relevant legislation including the Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.</p>
PRINCIPLE 10	PLANTING FOR BIODIVERSITY
	<p>Prioritise use of native, fruiting, and pollinator-friendly species for planting schemes.</p> <p>Flower beds will be created using sustainable planting.</p>

	<p>Soil health will be considered when designing and implementing planting plans and all compost used will be peat-free.</p> <p>Green waste such as wood chippings will be re-used where possible for example for mulch.</p>
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11.12 Conclusion

11.13 The Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030 updates the BAP by:

- Responding to significant national and local changes since 2021.
- Setting specific measurable targets where possible.
- Strengthening the link between nature improvement and other co-benefits such as carbon sequestration and storage, and health and wellbeing.
- Separating out “core business” actions to improve the way we report back on nature improvement.
- Covering district and council actions separately.
- Improving the way the council reports back on nature improvement.

11.14 The NIP sets out the council's strategic approach to promoting and achieving nature improvement and recovery across the Winchester district.

11.15 If adopted by Cabinet, the Winchester District Nature Improvement Plan will be launched, this will include publishing the entire technical document as well as a public facing summary document. This summary will include key content from the technical document, along with delivery priorities and project opportunities, drawing from the actions identified in the Plan for both the council and the district. Its presentation will ensure it is accessible and engaging so that residents are clear what we are seeking to achieve and how we all have a part to play in halting the decline in nature and biodiversity. This will also be accompanied by an explanatory and promotional short film.

12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

12.1 Keep the existing style of the Biodiversity Action Plan

12.1.1 This would not tie in with recent local and national changes and would not comply with the enhanced biodiversity duty under the Environment Act 2021. It would also not improve the way we prioritise actions or report back on biodiversity. Therefore, this option was rejected.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Committee Reports:-

HEP043 – Nature Improvement Plan, 3 July 2025

HEP041 - Biodiversity Action Plan Update, 3 December 2024

Other Background Documents:-

Winchester City Council Biodiversity Action Plan 2021

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Winchester District Nature Improvement Plan 2025 – 2030

Appendix B: Equality Impact Assessment Template (EIA)