

REPORT TITLE: NATURE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

3 JULY 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 Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030 (NIP) has been informed by various important existing council documents as well as national documents and legislation. Particularly the Winchester City Council Biodiversity Action Plan 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 aim of the NIP is to promote and achieve nature improvement and recovery across the Winchester district. This addresses the council's declaration of a nature emergency and the strengthened biodiversity duty in the Environment Act 2021.

To help focus efforts of both the council and the wider Winchester district community, five pathways are proposed in the plan:

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

Measures have been set where possible for each of the identified pathways. 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. To track progress against the five-year measures there will also be annual Action Plans, one for council land and one for the whole district.

Guiding principles have also been set for all council functions in relation to biodiversity, particularly for areas of work where numerical targets are not applicable.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Policy Committee is asked to

- 1) Note and comment on the Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025-2030 in particular relation to the proposed:
 - a) Five Pathways,
 - b) Principles
 - c) Measures

1 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 1.1 The Draft Nature Improvement Plan has been developed and will be delivered with current resourcing within the ecology team. This consists of a Principal Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer and an Ecologist and Biodiversity Officer. No further resources are required at this point.

The ecology team will pursue opportunities for funding where available.

2 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

2.1 Background

- 2.1.1 The Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025- 2030 (Appendix A) is in accordance with the council priority of 'Greener Faster' and reversing 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.

- 2.1.2 This Plan 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.

- 2.1.3 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. The comments made and feedback provided have been incorporated into the draft plan. In particular:

- River pollution and water management.
- Community involvement and use of citizen science.

2.2 Details of the Proposal

- 2.2.1 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, exceed them reflecting the district's rich natural assets and ecological potential.

- 2.2.2 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.

2.2.3 The aim of the NIP is to promote and achieve nature improvement and recovery across the Winchester district. Five pathways have been identified to deliver this:

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

2.2.4 These 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.

2.2.5 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. 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 3 and 4 of the Draft NIP), and shown below.

Council Land 2030 Measures		
1	Protect and manage land for nature	1.1 Sustain 100% of SSSI units achieving favourable/unfavourable-recovering condition
		1.2 Sustain 100% SINCs in favourable management
		1.3 Sustain 27.61% WCC land managed for nature
2	Create new spaces for nature	2.1 1 ha new 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 nature-based solutions	3.1 Sustain Tree canopy/woodland cover above 6.08% across WCC landownership
		3.2 An additional 50tCO ₂ e sequestered on council land

4	Prevent and control pollution	4.1	10 Wastewater Treatment Works on council land upgraded to reduce nitrogen and phosphorous loading
5	Connect 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	Sustain SWBG site area and status
		1.2	Sustain 88% of SSSIs units in the district achieving favourable/unfavourable-recovering condition
		1.3	Sustain 61% SINC's (surveyed in last 10 years) under positive management
		1.4	Sustain 11.39% land designated for nature
2	Create new spaces for nature	2.1	500 biodiversity units secured through habitat creation and enhancement through discharged Biodiversity Gain Plans
		2.2	100 biodiversity units secured through signing agreements with habitat banks
		2.3	10ha of Natural Green Space created
3	Deliver nature-based solutions	3.1	Sustain Tree canopy/woodland cover above 8.33%
4	Prevent and control pollution	4.1	Continue to deliver the council's nutrient mitigation strategy.
5	Connect 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

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| 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) |

2.2.6 A Council Land Nature Improvement Action Plan and District Nature Improvement Action Plan will be developed each year to track progress against the five-year measures. 2025/2026 versions of the two action plans are provided in Appendix C of the Draft NIP. Progress against these action plans can be reported to this policy committee and key activities from the NIP can be included in future Service Action Plans to cement the link to the council plan. An annual report will be published on the council website, and this will inform the action plan for the following year.

2.2.7 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
	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. 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.
PRINCIPLE 3	CHEMICAL USE
	Pesticides and herbicides will only be used on biodiversity sites where considered absolutely necessary, for example to remove invasive species.

	Strive to reduce herbicide, pesticide and non-organic chemical fertiliser use, on all council owned sites by 2030.
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
	<p>Follow biosecurity best practices guidelines and remove invasive and non-native species (INNS) from council owned land.</p> <p>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.</p>
PRINCIPLE 6	MULTIPLE BENEFITS
	<p>Consideration will be given to the combination of benefits which can be delivered through land management, development or specific projects, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements to nature • Health and wellbeing • Access to nature, open space and recreation • Nature based solutions (such as carbon sequestration, urban greening and flood alleviation) <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
	Support the delivery of species recovery strategies, referenced in the Environment Act 2021 and LNRS, as they emerge. 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.
PRINCIPLE 10	PLANTING FOR BIODIVERSITY
	Prioritise use of native, fruiting, and pollinator-friendly species for planting schemes. Flower beds will be created using sustainable planting. Soil health will be considered when designing and implementing planting plans and all compost used will be peat-free. Green waste such as wood chippings will be re-used where possible for example for mulch.

2.3 Proposed next steps

2.3.1 Following comments from the Health and Environment Policy Committee the final version of the Nature Improvement Plan 2025 – 2030 and the 2025/2026 Action Plans will be completed. These will be considered by Cabinet on 10 September 2025.

2.3.2 If adopted by Cabinet, the Nature Improvement Plan will be launched, this will include publishing the document on the website with a short film promoting the plan, and a communication programme.

2.4 Conclusion

2.4.1 The Draft 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

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

3 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

Keep the existing style of the Biodiversity Action Plan

- 3.1 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:-

HEP041 - Biodiversity Action Plan Update, 3 December 2024

Other Background Documents:-

Winchester City Council Biodiversity Action Plan 2021

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Draft Nature Improvement Plan 2025 - 2030