



## Weald to Waves

### The role of parish councils in nature recovery

#### What can Parish Councils do to help tackle climate change and to restore nature?

Our parish councils help to make up the fabric of our communities. As active citizens, you are valuable because of your role within our government structure and in the wider specialism, assets and connections they bring to society. The good work being done by pioneering councils and parish community networks is not always visible to the public, yet a great deal of conservation is happening quietly in our parks, gardens, churchyards, farms, allotments, smallholdings and open spaces and along miles of roadside verges. Few can argue with an ambition to restore nature and repair our damaged landscapes yet positive action is often held back by a lack of resources and capacity and competing priorities. The Weald to Waves initiative is not just a landscape collaboration but is a network of support – for sharing ideas, resources, and knowledge. Parish councils can play a powerful role in this local, regional and national cross-pollination.

We are calling on councils to help by **creating** new environments for nature to thrive, **connecting** healthy green spaces, **consolidating** community action through policy and planning and **catalysing** new initiatives and collaborations.

This may involve:

#### Community engagement

- Informing the local community of the biodiversity value of the local area. One way to achieve this is to have signage explaining the wildlife value of an area and why it's being managed in a particular way;
- Encouraging others to consider biodiversity in their activities, for instance, encouraging allotment holders to use wildlife-friendly techniques such as growing vegetables organically and without the use of slug pellets, or asking landowners to encourage wildflowers and areas of long grass;
- Appointing a tree or pond warden and/or a volunteer who could take some responsibility for implementing and monitoring any actions to improve biodiversity
- Asking local residents for their views on what they would like to be done to conserve biodiversity in the area, bearing in mind that not all suggestions will be either achievable or

desirable within a given habitat;

- Work with groups to plot and promote safe walking and cycle routes to minimise road use
- Publishing insight and stories, along with ideas for action, in local press and parish newsletters.
- Considering making grants or funds available to local projects that protect and enhance biodiversity.
- Networking with local agencies such as the Local Authority tree officer or Natural England, Environment Agency and your Wildlife Trusts, RSPB and others. They are there to help you to understand and decipher the complexity of your local habitats and how best to manage them.
- Thinking about the bigger picture; organisations promoting the conservation of one specific species may not be able to offer advice on managing a site for wildlife as a whole; managing a site solely for one species group can be detrimental to another and upset the ecological balance.

## Use of voice and powers

- Liaising with specialist teams to calculate and communicate the nature implications of key decisions.
- Pursuing nature friendly conditions from decision makers; insisting upon a species range of bird and bat boxes, hedges not fences, native planting and wild edges to developments, tunnels for toads and hedgehogs;
- Actively discouraging developments that do not safeguard or enhance local and important biodiversity;
- For larger infrastructure projects lobbying for lower carbon less nature harmful alternatives, promoting sustainable development; asking local authorities and MPs to represent you;
- Cooperating to create byelaws and/or declare land as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR).

## Managing land for biodiversity

- Reducing activities that harm wildlife, from using peat-free compost to shunning pesticides especially near ponds of water courses and ensuring light pollution is controlled, using signage on council-owned land where you use peat-free compost.
- Control of invasive and non-native species that are detrimental to native flora or fauna, for instance Japanese Knotweed. Guidance is available on how to identify and control invasive species but take care to target the correct species as there may be beneficial native species that look very similar.

- Increasing tree cover, aiming for at least 20% tree cover and ideally encouraging and supporting landowners to take part in tree planting. The Tree Charter, developed by the Woodland Trust, provides excellent guidance on how to increase tree cover. The National Association of Local Councils website provides case studies where it has been used.
- Ensuring action never damages or destroys an already valuable habitat, particularly as its importance may not always be obvious. An appropriate survey should highlight any sites or habitats to be either left alone or managed differently.
- Limiting cutting to those points where they present a visual obstruction, other areas should be left untouched and can be enhanced with seeding wildflowers.
- Where appropriate and safe to do so, leave standing and fallen dead-wood as a habitat for invertebrates. Dead wood in watercourses also has significant biodiversity value so leave alone unless removal is essential for preventing flooding or it is diverting water-flow.
- If required, manually remove dead leaves or other vegetation debris from pathways, and avoid using leaf-blowers as recent studies have shown a strong link between their use and the decline of insect populations. Leaf litter, moss, piles of stones and dead vegetation are all important micro-habitats for invertebrates to feed, breed and shelter.

Friends of the Earth and Buglife have produced a [guide to developing an action plan](#) for helping pollinators such as bees.

## Leading from the front

- Ensuring council buildings are as energy efficient as possible and, where possible, producing green energy, to encourage others in the community to do so.
- Taking an active interest in the condition and management of greenspace that runs through parishes, working with the County Council to adapt their cutting regimes of hedges, verges and roadside trees to take account of nature.
- Using green transport – encouraging employees and councillors and your community to walk, cycle or use public transport or car-share. Identify safe walking and cycling routes and where necessary work in partnership with district and county councils to deliver them.

## Consolidating action

### Create a Biodiversity or Environmental Policy

An Environmental Policy is a document that encompasses everything that could impact on the environment, including reducing carbon emissions, sustainable use of resources such as paper, fuel, water and power, re-using and recycling, sustainable procurement of resources such as timber, and using sustainably-sourced and native tree or plant species.

A Biodiversity Policy details how the Council would protect, record, enhance and promote an understanding of biodiversity within the Parish.

### Create a Parish Map

Creating a Parish Map is a good way to involve the community in charting the local features and places that matter to them, including places of cultural, historical and wildlife interest. Features such as meadows, woodlands, hedgerows, ponds and rivers can be included in the map, which will be a useful current resource and an excellent reference point in the future. This could be combined with carrying out an audit or survey of key species and habitats through liaison with local wildlife groups and/or citizen scientists. Perhaps there is a local creative or design team who can help to bring that research and data to life in a way that is publicly accessible and engaging.

### **Create a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)**

A BAP is one strategy for conserving, protecting and enhancing biological diversity in a local area, and is developed by an organisation in relation to property, land and activities that are under the organisation's control, including those undertaken by agents or contractors working for the Parish Council. Even if the Council chooses not to develop a BAP, undertaking some or all of the processes outlined below can still be very useful.

### **Designating sites within the Neighbourhood Plan for trees, renewable energy and nature Restoration**

In practice, the development of 90% of Neighbourhood Plans is led by town and parish councils working hand in hand with their communities. The Neighbourhood Planning process is far from perfect and very time consuming, but it offers the community the opportunity to show it means business on protecting and enhancing the environment for future generations.

### **Using the Neighbourhood Plan to require new homes to be energy efficient, nature friendly, and located close to public transport and amenities.**

Given the climate and nature emergency, it's unfortunate that the government doesn't require all new homes to be as sustainable as possible. Neighbourhood Plans will identify sites for future housing and should push for these to be zero-carbon and nature friendly, even though the local planning authority may seek to override this aim. Homes should also be fitted with renewable energy. Homes need to be located close to amenities and public transport to avoid car dependency.

## **Get involved!**

We will be uploading and adding community resources on how to boost biodiversity through local action to WealdtoWaves.co.uk. If you have a case study to contribute or a story of a success or a set of challenges, then please get in touch so we can grow and develop these tools.

### **Contact**

Libby Drew

Director, Knepp Wildland Foundation

[Libby@Knepp.co.uk](mailto:Libby@Knepp.co.uk)

07779006149