



Wilder Horsham District

Sussex Wildlife Trust working in partnership with Horsham District Council

Introduction

The Horsham District has a rich natural environment which forms part of its identity and sense of place. National studies confirm that wildlife has declined significantly over the last 20-30 years. According to a group of national conservation organisations 15% of wildlife species are under threat of extinction¹. Since the 1970's the populations of 41% of UK species have reduced.

This national picture is reflected in the Horsham District. For example, wildflower meadows which formed part of the landscape character of the area were once a common sight but these are now rare. Individual species, such as the turtle dove, could become extinct, as numbers in Sussex are now critical.

Horsham District Council and the Sussex Wildlife Trust have formed a partnership to reverse the decline in species and habitats. This will ensure that the District's natural environment is protected and enhanced so that it remains an attractive place to live and work. It will also contribute to tackling and reducing the impacts of climate change. This document sets out what this partnership will achieve.

The aims of this five year partnership are to:

- *Help wildlife thrive across the Horsham District;*
- *Create networks of land that is protected and enhanced for wildlife, to allow habitats to expand and for species populations to increase which will ensure that they are resilient to change;*
- *Increase awareness of actions that communities can take to improve their local natural environment and the benefits that wildlife provides;*
- *Maximise the opportunities from protecting and enhancing wildlife to tackling climate change and to reduce the impacts of a changing climate.*

Background

The Horsham District has a high quality and valued landscape. The southern part of the district is within the South Downs National Park and the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty covers the north eastern area. It also has numerous sites that are protected because of their value to wildlife. This ranges from international sites such as the Arun Valley Ramsar site with a significant diversity of species, through to Sites of Special Scientific Interest like St Leonard's Forest and numerous locally important areas, such as Woods Mill, in Small Dole and Chesworth Farm, near Horsham.

¹ Hayhow DB et al (2019) The State of Nature 2019. The State of Nature Partnership.

The wider countryside also contains a wide variety of habitats that support numerous different species. Map one shows the different habitats found in the Horsham district. One of the main challenges is that habitats (whether they are protected or not) are becoming increasingly fragmented and isolated from each other. This does not allow species to move around, making wildlife less resilient to change; such as changes in land management or the climate.

Why take action?

Nature forms an integral part of the landscape that makes the Horsham District a special place and many people value wildlife for its own sake. These natural assets, such as water, soil and landscape are often called Natural Capital. The value of these is sometimes expressed in financial terms, so the contribution that these assets provide and, therefore, the loss of these assets can be understood alongside economic gains.

The decline of wildlife (a natural asset) provides a critical challenge because nature provides many benefits that are essential to us all. Some of these benefits are:-

- Pollinating plants which gives us food
- Filtering pollutants from the air and water
- Creating soil
- Capturing carbon by trees and soil (carbon is one of the main gases contributing to enhanced climate change)
- Providing products; such as timber and medicines
- Reducing flood risk
- Contributing to health and wellbeing from being in natural surroundings and opportunities to exercise, such as walking and cycling
- Giving a sense of place; adding to the cultural heritage of the district.

These benefits are all known as Ecosystems Services. Reversing the decline in wildlife ensures that nature assets are retained and that they can continue to provide these benefits.

The Horsham District is under increasing pressure for development, to provide houses for current and future generations. Whilst development is necessary, it needs to ensure that the District retains and enhances its natural environment and the services that this provides. This partnership will, therefore, ensure that the opportunities to enhance wildlife in new developments form part of the overall vision for the District. For example, it will link into a new approach known as biodiversity net gain. This seeks to ensure that wildlife is enhanced in new development. On site where this is not possible, developers would pay for the enhancement of other sites that would form part of the Nature Recovery Network.

The partnership will be at the forefront of this new approach to reversing the decline in wildlife. Government Legislation and guidance is emerging on issues such as Nature Recovery Networks. This means that Wilder Horsham District programme will be well placed to maximise any new funding opportunities.

It will also link to the work of the Sussex Local Nature Partnership which has recently adopted the “*Sussex Natural Capital Investment Strategy*”². This document, the result of cross sector collaboration (Local Authorities are currently represented at a county and unitary level) provides guidance and a shared framework for nature’s recovery in Sussex. It proposes guiding principles for a Sussex Nature Recovery Network and is a leading strategy in the local application of natural capital principles and emerging policy. Wilder Horsham District will be able to draw on current thinking from the Sussex Local Nature Partnership to

² Sussex Local Nature Partnership (2019) Natural Capital Investment Strategy for Sussex 2019-2024.

ensure it is linking biodiversity net gain, Nature Recovery Networks and Local Nature Recovery Strategies appropriately.

What action can be taken?

There have been some successes in protecting and enhancing wildlife, such as the Rewilding successes of the Knepp Estate and the restoration of river habitat on the Adur. However, in order to reverse the general decline in habitats and species population new approaches are required. Government policy also has recognised this³. The partnership between the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the Council will draw on some of these new approaches; such as taking a wider landscape approach to enhance wildlife and not restricting actions to specific sites. However, there are certain landscapes and areas of the Horsham District that will be the focus of the work of the partnership. At present these are:-

1. **Hedgerows** in the Low Weald (providing important connectivity between fragmented habitats)
2. **Woodland** – new planting and allowing natural regeneration are important tools in capturing more carbon and helping wildlife
3. The Adur catchment; improve **freshwater and floodplain habitats**, water quality and flood resilience through working with natural processes
4. Join up key sites, such as the Knepp Estate with the woodland to the north-east of Horsham town and The Mens in the west of the District, creating the core of a District wide **ecological network**.
5. Take action to support **pollinating insects** throughout the district, in both towns and rural areas.

Although these are currently the focus of the work, this is likely to change as more information emerges from the work of the Sussex Nature Partnership.

The table at the end of this document gives more detail on the actions that will be taken under four headings:-

- Organisational resilience
- Landscape resilience
- Community resilience
- Legacy

Each of these contribute to the overarching aims of the partnership. The measures of success in the action tables are currently outputs from the programme. Proxy measures will be developed to gauge the success of enhancing nature across the District once more analysis has been completed.

Horsham District Council has a direct role to play in creating a wilder district, as it owns and manages land in the area. It is already changing the way it manages its parks and countryside sites to increase species and habitats. For example, it owns and manages Chesworth Farm, a 90 acre site, which gives Horsham residents an opportunity to experience the benefits of nature within walking distance of their homes. The District Council will draw on the expertise of the Sussex Wildlife Trust to make further improvements and enhance the presence of the Trust throughout the District.

The Trust will also work with the council to embed the principles of the Wilder Horsham District programme into all parts of the organisation. This will build **organisational resilience** to achieve the aims of the partnership. For example, the Trust will run training events for staff and help the council develop policies on

³ HM Government (2018) A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Department for Food, Rural Affairs and Agriculture

biodiversity as part of the review of the Local Plan, as well as reviewing the existing Green Infrastructure Strategy (2014).

Although the District has wildlife sites and species that are protected, a complementary approach to this form of nature conservation is required to reverse the decline in nature. Protected sites and species are often isolated from each other and habitats are becoming increasingly fragmented. A landscape approach is required which increases wildlife in all parts of the countryside and also in urban areas. This will build **landscape resilience** which will ensure that wildlife can move around the landscape and also has the benefit of making nature accessible to more people.

This approach will require changes to land management and actions such as planting trees and hedgerows to link sites that are already important for wildlife. These are known as Nature Recovery Networks. The partnership will, therefore, work with landowners and communities to develop these networks. This work will also link to the Local Plan by highlighting areas where new development can play a part in enhancing these networks. We will use the best available data sets for the district, from a range of organisations to ensure that clear objectives are put in place for the Horsham District Nature Recovery Network. For example, some areas will prioritise flood resilience or water quality issues but all areas will prioritise the creation of new linkages in the landscape.

The final part of the overarching actions is to ensure that **communities** across the Horsham District are part of the solution to reversing the decline in wildlife. There are many organisations and community groups that are already taking action to improve the natural environment of the District. Organisations such as Parish and Neighbourhood Councils own land and are close to their communities. It is also important to inspire new communities to get involved. The partnership will provide support and funding for existing and new organisations and communities to enhance wildlife and provide opportunities for more residents to access the natural environment. It is important that everyone is part of the overall vision to reverse the decline in wildlife and have an increased understanding of the critical benefits that habitats and species provide.

It is important that the work that this partnership commences continues beyond five years. To build a **legacy** the partnership will maximise opportunities to leverage new funding; such as through the work of the Local Nature Partnership. The foundations that are put in place by embedding the principles of a Wilder Horsham District into the council, as well as the work with landowners, organisations and community groups will ensure that the work to reverse the decline in the wildlife of the district will continue beyond the life of the partnership.