



<b>Report to:</b>	Climate and Environment Advisory Committee 4 <sup>th</sup> April 2023
<b>Lead Cabinet Member:</b>	Lead Cabinet Member for Environment
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	Bode Esan

---

## **Doubling nature in South Cambridgeshire: Progress Update**

### **Executive Summary**

1. In 2021 South Cambridgeshire District Council published its Doubling Nature Strategy (DNS), following the declaration of an ecological emergency in July 2019 at Full Council. 'Doubling nature' is an aspiration rather than a closely defined target. The strategy sets out a plan for council actions to impact positively directly and indirectly on the district's natural capital, that is, its stock of natural resources. This report updates and provides detail on these actions. It then presents an approach for further involvement by the Council in this area, to define and advance the Council's contribution to doubling nature in South Cambridgeshire.

### **Key Decision**

**No**

### **Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the Committee considers the report and the actions below and advises the Lead Cabinet Member for Climate and Environment accordingly.
  - 3.1 Realise benefit for nature in South Cambridgeshire via Biodiversity Net Gain planning policy, by working with communities to identify local opportunities to restore nature and understand where biodiversity gains might be best placed.
  - 3.2 Plan subsequent phases of nature-based projects and/or management on HRA estate including reduced mowing regimes and planting, following advice from an ecologist.
  - 3.3 Expand the nature-based projects delivered through watercourse management
  - 3.4 Continue the Council's Six Free Trees with at least 50 parish councils planting trees.

3.5 Work with external partners through the Natural Cambridgeshire partnership to advance support for parish-scale and community projects and support projects within strategic Priority Landscape Areas.

3.6 Further promote the concept of gardening for nature, including measures such as home composting in the context of soil's contribution to natural capital, to inform and enable residents to plant to enhance nature in their gardens or local communities.

3.7 Share best practise with regard to local nature recovery through the Zero Carbon Communities communication channels, for example, the nature recovery projects within Cottenham.

3.8 Improve uptake of grants to villages to plant trees and help biodiversity projects to deliver 'doubling nature' at the parish level.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

3. The Committee's role is to advise Cabinet on policies, actions and resources required to deliver on the Council's climate change and environmental ambitions and provide updates on progress towards achieving agreed targets and outcomes

### **Details**

4. Following South Cambridgeshire District Council's declaration of an ecological emergency, the Council published its Doubling Nature Strategy (DNS) in 2021, to establish the Council's vision to double nature by 2050 and set its approach to delivering that vision. As summarised in the DNS and the combined Zero Carbon and Doubling Nature Action Plan (ZCDNAP) there are a wide range of initiatives underway across the council to support the doubling nature vision. The wider context of doubling nature actions across the Council and district is set out in the following sections.

### **Being an exemplar through our own estate and operations**

5. A large proportion of the Council's doubling nature activities on its own land are carried out by the Housing department. A tree audit of all 2975 trees on communal HRA land has produced a maintenance and enhancement programme which is now underway. In addition to internally funded tree planting, tree and hedge planting is taking place at two locations on HRA amenity land, funded through the Local Authorities Treescapes scheme, and the Housing department has also supported parish councils to plant trees on HRA land. In addition, the Housing department and their grounds maintenance contractor are setting up a pilot project to create wildflower meadow areas at four locations on HRA Land for this growing season.
6. The Housing department's open spaces maintenance policy is being redeveloped to reflect the ambitions of the doubling nature strategy and support is being

provided to resident initiatives such as hand-weeding in place of chemical weedkillers, carried out by a resident's group in Cottenham. A review of Housing garage sites for alternative uses will identify any opportunities for biodiversity enhancement. Furthermore, in alignment with good sustainability practice, our estate contractors minimise pesticide use where possible and avoid peat-based compost.

7. The Council has started to explore opportunities for nature recovery on Council-owned commercial land and property, and how to make the business case for investment in biodiversity projects. The Council has supported the Nature Smart Cities programme by providing an example real-life site and several project scenarios to assess outcomes for nature and the case for change. Nature Smart Cities is an Interreg-funded programme to develop an easy-to-use Business Model to quantify the benefits of green infrastructure and ecosystem services. Carbon sequestration for example, but also rainwater infiltration, air quality, biodiversity, social cohesion or the effect on the temperature. Further information on Nature Smart Cities can be found at the Background Papers section.
8. The Council is responsible for maintenance of 275km of awarded watercourses. These are managed for nature and flood prevention using a variety of techniques to preserve and encourage habitats for wildlife, including water voles and wild trout. These techniques largely reflect those used by local Internal Drainage Board (IDBs), however the Environmental Operations Team also work with partner organisations such as the RSPB and the Wild Trout Trust to ensure their work is carried out in the interests of nature and assist local nature groups to carry out smaller nature projects.
9. The Councils manages three closed churchyards in Horseheath, Great Shelford and Willingham. These are currently overseen by the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS) and outline management plans have been created to ensure these sites are managed for both nature and their historic environment, while balancing health and safety obligations.

### **Using our direct influence through policy**

#### **Biodiversity**

10. The most significant contributor to the Council's doubling nature ambitions is arguably through the planning system. This contribution is mainly achieved through securing measurable improvements for biodiversity through Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), to create or enhance habitats affected by development. A 10% increase in BNG, mandated in the Environment Act 2021, will be required by all planning applications from November 2023. However, Ecology officers within GCSPS are already negotiating this wherever possible ahead of the November 2023 deadline. An aspiration for a 20% BNG requirement is being explored as a target for the emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan, exceeding the increase required in the Environment Act and tested as viable in other parts of England (Kent).

11. The emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan will include policies to enhance biodiversity and green spaces in new developments across the district. The evidence base for the Plan includes an extensive study which maps existing green infrastructure (GI) and identifies 14 strategic initiatives for improvements to green infrastructure in Greater Cambridge. These are mapped out in **Appendix A**.
12. Climate adaptation measures proposed within the emerging local plan employ 'green infrastructure' within new developments to reduce impacts of climate change that are being felt now. This includes measures such as using tree planting and soft landscaping to naturally cool buildings, and green roofs and sustainable drainage systems to help address flooding risk. These measures will support biodiversity while strengthening climate adaptation within new communities.
13. In addition, the adopted Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document strengthens the existing South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018 biodiversity policies and provides updated guidance for securing biodiversity enhancements in new developments incorporating language from the Environment Act 2021.
14. Alongside the current and emerging Local Plans, the Neighbourhood Planning process enables parish councils to set policies in addition to those in the Local Plan to guide development in their locality and protect and improve green infrastructure.

#### Water

15. The Council's influence over water quality is similarly established through the planning system. The Cambridgeshire Flood and Water Supplementary Planning Document supports existing Local Plan water management policies and guides the approach to flood risk for new developments, by incorporating sustainable drainage systems which can preserve water quality, provide habitats, and increase biodiversity.
16. A council motion was passed in September 2022 with a number of actions in response to the dumping of sewage in South Cambridgeshire chalk streams. A key action was to consider an application to DEFRA for inland bathing water designation along a stretch of the River Cam. This would require water quality sampling and monitoring for at least a year within the designated area. A consultant is currently being engaged to advise on the practicalities, costs and timeline of submitting an application to DEFRA. This will inform a decision to proceed or not with the application.

#### Soil

17. Through the proposed policies of the emerging Local Plan, the Council is intending to support protection of soil quality, another crucial aspect of our natural capital and a key element of the ecosystem. Significant adverse impacts on soil occur through activities associated with construction. As currently proposed, local

plan policy could promote approaches that minimise soil disturbance, compaction, and disposal during construction projects.

Air

18. Alongside water, air quality is another crucial aspect of our natural capital and following establishment of the Air Quality Strategy, actions are underway by the Environmental Health department to monitor and protect air quality in the district, reducing impacts from new developments and promoting and educating residents on air quality.

### **Working in partnership with organisations and communities**

19. The Zero Carbon Communities grant, and Six Free Trees programme enable tree planting which improve biodiversity as well as performing a carbon reduction function.
20. The Community Chest Biodiversity Grant is also available for parishes, charities, and community groups to fund biodiversity measures. This can fund up to £2,000 per project. The grant has an annual budget allocation of 10,000 and is in its second year. Three successful applications have been funded so far, leaving approximately £17,000 still available for 2022/23 at the time of writing. Ways of increasing future uptake for this grant could be investigated, for instance, by engaging with community groups to gain a better understanding of any obstacles they are facing in setting up nature projects, that might be stopping them from applying to the grant.
21. GCSP will also be undertaking a pilot project involving two parish councils, to review the process of designating Tree Preservation Orders (TPO), and digitising TPO records across the district.
22. Co-ordinated by the Communities Team, Community-Led Plan process enables communities to produce an action plan that helps local people to take steps towards delivering the change they want to see in their areas. These plans can support and guide work on community nature projects.
23. The council is a partner in Natural Cambridgeshire, the Local Nature Partnership for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, works to bring together key organisations, businesses and communities to champion, influence, and action that can establish a significant long-term recovery of nature in our area.
24. Natural Cambridgeshire have drawn up six priority landscapes within the county, within which there are opportunities for landscape scale transformation. Two of these landscape areas, the West Cambridgeshire Hundreds and the Cambridge Nature Network, fall partly within South Cambridgeshire. These areas have been incorporated into the aforementioned evidence base of the Greater Cambridge Plan, to inform the development strategic initiatives for green infrastructure improvements and are referenced in the Council's Interim Approach to Biodiversity Net Gain, which can be found in the **Background Papers** section.

25. Natural Cambridgeshire also have developed the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit, to support communities in creating their own nature recovery plans and in doing so deliver increases in key wildlife habitats, help communities to appreciate their natural and built heritage, promote public health and wellbeing and foster new jobs and economic opportunities. A link to the full toolkit is provided in the **Background Papers** for this report.
26. Natural Cambridgeshire have secured a £1million 'fund for nature' from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. This will incentivise and attract investment in landscape-scale projects as well as small parish level community projects.
27. Natural Cambridgeshire will also be working with the Combined Authority, Cambridgeshire County Council, and district councils, to develop the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Nature Recovery Strategy as mandated by the Environment Act 2021. This work will create an overarching strategy to tackle the nature crisis and deliver co-benefits for the climate, health and wellbeing.

### **Recommendations for further action**

28. It is evident that within the Council there are a range of activities, from those supporting larger scale gains for nature through BNG, to smaller scale / high engagement community scale nature projects. This balance is retained in the options for further doubling nature initiatives set out in the following section, which are summarised in the recommendations at the head of this report.
29. In terms of its ability to provide strategic, larger scale improvements for nature through BNG, the planning process is considered to be one of the key methods through which the Council can meet its doubling nature ambitions. This would be far easier however, if we were effecting change within our own estate, and so perhaps a consideration about the future possibility of owning land upon which to create BNG might be considered as one option by the Council.
30. It is therefore important that this area continues to develop to maximise the benefit to South Cambridgeshire of BNG improvements. Key to this is the delivery of BNG measures in identified strategic locations, and the coordination of this with communities to maximise the outcomes for people and environment. This is an area already being explored by GCSP.
31. As noted above there are already nature projects underway on the Council's own land; it is proposed that this work continues and is enhanced by identifying areas of SCDC's own estate that may lend themselves to specific nature improvements, in particular where these areas overlap with Natural Cambridgeshire's priority areas and the Council's strategic green infrastructure initiatives identified through the GCSP Local Plan process.
32. This would build upon the process used for the successful application to the Local Authority Treescaping fund. Seeking advice from a consultant ecologist will aid in identifying suitable sites and in devising specific plans for the enhancement and

management of these areas, subject to the requirements and constraints of HRA operations and resourcing.

33. There is also an opportunity to further develop projects related to the Council's work on awarded watercourses, particularly supporting local conservation groups in watercourse improvement efforts, utilising inhouse knowledge and equipment.
34. There is an opportunity to build on the support to community groups and parish councils carried out via the Six Free Trees and Zero Carbon Communities programmes and Community Chest Biodiversity Grant. This could be enhanced by more effective signposting to support and resources from external agencies, (such as the Local Nature Recovery Toolkit), working to increase uptake of the Biodiversity Grant and Six Free Trees scheme, and by upholding and promoting exemplars of community action.
35. An example of this is the work done in Cottenham, led by the late Cllr John Loveluck, a member of Climate and Environment Advisory Committee who worked with Sustainable Cottenham to deliver an array of nature projects in Cottenham. Appendix B shows a case study of nature-based projects in Cottenham which could be used to encourage and inspire action elsewhere.
36. Given the importance of soil within as part of Cambridgeshire's natural capital, and the role of gardens as a haven for wildlife, greater promotion of measures like home composting, avoidance of peat-based compost and gardening for nature would increase awareness of these issues, and better enable residents to preserve and enhance nature within their own spheres.
37. While this is an area that the Council is already exploring, it is recognised that more focussed discussion and collaboration with external partners would allow the Council to leverage greater support for parish councils and community groups and bring to bear the dedicated resource and expertise at the disposal of these partners.
38. Similarly to how the Council engaged with the Nature Smart Cities programme, there will likely be future opportunities to utilise tools and best practise, including land use frameworks to assess suitability of land for a number of different uses in order to maximise ecosystem services and positive impact.

## **Implications**

39. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:

## **Financial**

40. Financial resources for the proposed actions will be assigned through the Council's usual budgetary processes.

## **Climate Change**

41. The proposal would allow the council to enhance natural assets on its own estate and improve support given to residents for doubling nature in their communities, to reduce the damage to nature by climate change.

## **Consultation Responses**

42. The Housing Department, Communities Team and Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service have been consulted on the content of this report.

## **Alignment with Council Priority Areas**

### **Being green to our core**

**The proposal would support the council's commitment to doubling nature and addressing the ecological emergency.**

## **Background papers**

Natural Cambridgeshire; Local Nature Recovery Toolkit 2020

[https://naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Doubling-Nature\\_Local-nature-recovery-toolkit.pdf](https://naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Doubling-Nature_Local-nature-recovery-toolkit.pdf)

21 June 2022 An interim approach to biodiversity net gain including offsite provision  
<https://scambs.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1095&MIId=9469&Ver=4>

### **12 Jan 2021 Doubling Nature Strategy and (plans for) Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document**

<https://scambs.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s120256/Doubling%20Nature%20Strategy%20Biodiversity%20Report.pdf>

14 June 2021, Biodiversity Supplementary Planning document

<https://scambs.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s122284/SPD%20Report.pdf>

Nature Smart Cities

<https://naturesmartcities.eu/>

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Green Infrastructure and Cambridge Nature Network maps

Appendix B: Case study: Cottenham Community Nature Sites



**Report Authors:**

Luke Waddington – Project Officer

Siobhan Mellon – Development Officer – Climate and Environment

Alex Snelling-Day – Waste Policy, Climate and Environment Team Manager