

Biodiversity Duty Report 2026

1.0 Background to North Herts Council

North Herts Council is a district council covering the northernmost area of Hertfordshire. It is a predominantly rural district covering approximately 375 square kilometres of land, making it the second largest geographical district in Hertfordshire. There are four main urban areas: the historic market towns of Baldock, Hitchin, and Royston, and the world's first garden city – Letchworth Garden City. There are also smaller settlements within open countryside, making it a district which balances the urban and the rural. The ONS estimated a population of 135,761 in 2025.

Key functions of North Herts Council include: housing services; planning services, including strategic planning; waste collection; licensing; and greenspace management.

2.0 Biodiversity Duty consideration

In accordance with the Biodiversity Duty (Environment Act 2021), local authorities were required to make an initial consideration of what they could do to conserve and enhance biodiversity by 1st January 2024. This consideration was made through cross-department discussion where we identified the following areas as those where the council could make the most meaningful impact: greenspace management; the planning system; our estates portfolio; and partnership working and community engagement.

External strategies, and the aims and outputs of partnership groups of which we are a member, have also been considered in the development of our biodiversity work. This includes the Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership, and the North Chilterns Landscape Partnership.

3.0 Biodiversity within our governance framework

The Council Plan 2024-2027 lays out the Council's strategic priorities, including Sustainability. Our Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 was approved by Cabinet in June 2025, and details our specific objectives in this area and the actions we will take to further this priority. Each action is assigned to a relevant team for delivery, and progress on the actions is reviewed by the council's Climate and Sustainability Officer Group (CSOG) and reported to Political Liaison Board (comprised of Cabinet Members and our Leadership Team) on a quarterly basis.

Our Biodiversity Duty commitments are integrated into our Sustainability Strategy, with Biodiversity being one of the specific themes of the Strategy. This enables us to consolidate all sustainability actions, many of which are cross-cutting, into one framework for easier co-ordination, monitoring, and reporting.

4.0 Objectives and actions

We have established one overarching objective for biodiversity, as well as fourteen specific actions in key areas of influence. These are set out in our Sustainability Strategy. The table below lays out the biodiversity actions and progress made from the beginning of the reporting period (1st January 2024 – by which date local authorities were required to

complete an initial consideration of what they could do for biodiversity) up to the end date of the first reporting period (1st January 2026).

Our biodiversity objective is: *Increase Biodiversity in North Herts.*

Action Number	Action	Progress update
38	Work in partnership with the Wildlife Trust and others to make improvements to North Herts Council sites, and rivers and chalk streams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greenspace Team are working in partnership with Countryside Management Service (CMS) at Hertfordshire County Council on meadow conservation at our sites. A recent example includes establishment of a perennial wildflower meadow at Walsworth Common. The works focused on appropriate ground preparation, species-rich seed mixes, and ongoing management to help improve floral diversity, support pollinators, and enhance overall ecological value of the site. • Continued engagement with 'Friends of' groups to make improvements to sites. • Greenspace Team currently preparing a project brief for river improvement work at Purwell to enable future funding bids.
39	Continually review opportunities to deliver the aspirational elements of site-specific Greenspace Action Plans; and review and consider additional aspirations as each plan comes up for renewal (e.g. using s106/BNG money to deliver)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This work is ongoing. Recent examples include tree works at Great Ashby and Weston Hills which form part of a wider woodland management approach, combining selective works to improve woodland structure. This includes removing unsafe or declining ash, encouraging natural regeneration, and planning for future planting with a diverse mix of resilient species. This is to support long-term woodland health and biodiversity. • Achieved Green Flag Awards for five of our greenspaces in 2025. The criteria includes consideration of the environmental management of sites, as well as biodiversity, landscape, and heritage.
40	Review the success of implementing the greenspace wildling audit recommendations; and seek and implement further recommendations from Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greenspace Team are currently working with 'Friends of' groups to establish volunteer groups to help monitor and record the benefits resulting from implementation of wildling audit recommendations at our conservation sites. Aiming to have volunteer groups in place for spring 2026.
41	Make it a priority for river projects to support suitable habitat for water voles; where possible, support the Wildlife Trust's aspiration to reintroduce water voles into Purwell.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work was undertaken to encourage water voles upstream on the River Purwell to move downstream. However, these efforts have so far been unsuccessful. Water vole decline is driven largely by the spread of mink and we are aware of mink eradication work being undertaken in the East of England. We will consider working with partners on this where opportunities arise.

42	Explore options to landscape an area of Wilbury Hills Cemetery and incorporate more biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wild areas including a wild meadow are now in place at Wilbury Hills Cemetery.
43	Review the impact of our reduced mowing regimes, and consider management amendments at the appropriate point in the Greenspace Management contract to help increase species diversity. - Provide communications to residents about the reasons for this and the impacts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing. A 12-month communications plan has been developed to deliver communications on various aspects of biodiversity and greenspace management. This includes the benefits of reduced mowing regimes.
44	Engage with resident groups and provide information on the wider benefits of reduced mowing regimes in areas where this leads to complaints.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A 12-month communications plan has been developed to deliver communications on various aspects of biodiversity and greenspace management, including the benefits of reduced mowing regimes; bulb and tree planting; and meadows. The Greenspace Team will be working in partnership with John O'Conner to extend the bee corridor to Baldock in April 2026, following successful implementation in Letchworth and Royston in the preceding years. The extension will provide further opportunity to promote the benefits of reduced mowing. The Climate Hive Engagement platform now has around 950 subscribers and includes communications and updates on our biodiversity work. This will include specific communication on reduced mowing regimes in 2026.
45	Identify opportunities to harness the power of volunteers to achieve shared goals around increasing nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are currently reviewing work previously undertaken by volunteers around biodiversity, (specifically the work to create more wildflower areas in Royston), and looking to promote this more widely as part of a call for volunteers for similar work. Plan to use the Cabinet Panel on the Environment as well as our Climate Hive to promote. Policy & Strategy are currently reviewing local biodiversity-related volunteering opportunities which could be promoted to staff, to enable volunteer leave to contribute to our biodiversity objectives.
46	Review the finalised version of the Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy to identify if there are opportunities to contribute to the priorities identified.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) has now been published and we have promoted the launch event. Officers reviewed the Strategy ahead of publication and will continue to look at how we can work with partners to further the strategies aims, as opportunities arise. As a Local Planning Authority we must 'have regard' to the LNRS when making planning decisions.

47	Work with colleagues from social housing providers to find opportunities to incorporate nature-positive actions into ongoing work e.g. adding Swift bricks to houses which are being retrofitted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yet to be commenced.
48	<p>Make full consideration of Biodiversity within the Local Plan Review process including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exploring the possibility of a target above the mandatory 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) for development within North Herts. - Considering the allocation of nature networks. - Inviting landowners to put forward potential areas for open space and nature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While some authorities previously set BNG targets above 10%, the latest government guidance states that plan-makers should not seek a higher percentage than the statutory objective of 10% biodiversity net gain, either on an area-wide basis or for specific allocations for development unless justified. In light of this, we will consider whether any justifications can be made in association with call for sites and LNRS focus areas. • The Local Plan review will take into consideration areas that the LNRS has highlighted as being key for nature recovery locally. • The first call for sites has gone out as part of the Local Plan review. A few sites have come forward for biodiversity.
49	Review council-owned land to ascertain whether we have sites which may be suitable for biodiversity projects including wildflower areas and rewilding and Biodiversity Net Gain offsetting from development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant progress has been made on this review and identifying potential sites for further more detailed review in consultation with the council's senior ecologist. We expect to complete the initial review by the end of April 2026, identifying those sites for more detailed review for suitability. We will report back with further detail in future reports.
50	Review the opportunity and feasibility of creating a habitat bank using council estate to sell biodiversity units to developers who need to offset required BNG.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In June 2025, Cabinet gave approval to progress with plans to improve management of land at Radburn Way, Letchworth, with the intention of providing a habitat bank or similar. This work is progressing on schedule, and the Greenspace Team are working with Countryside Management Services (CMS) to look at what they may be able to do at the site. • Further potential sites may come forward from the action above (49).
51	Support prospective habitat banks which are in accordance with Local Nature Recovery Strategy aspirations in securing legal agreements to enable access to the biodiversity gain register.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This work is ongoing. • Two privately-owned sites have come forward as potential habitat banks and the council is working to secure legal agreements with them.

4.1 Delivering actions for biodiversity in the next reporting period

The actions detailed above are planned for delivery through to 2030. Over the course of the next reporting period, the council will continue to work towards its biodiversity objective through further progressing these actions and commencing work on those which have not yet been started. The actions will continue to be monitored via the usual Sustainability

Strategy 2025-2030 monitoring mechanisms. This includes quarterly written updates from officers responsible for each action; evaluation of progress by the Climate and Sustainability Officer Group (CSOG); and quarterly reports to Political Liaison Board. The opportunity to amend and introduce further actions will be considered periodically throughout the Strategy's duration, in discussion with relevant officers and CSOG. The end date of the next reporting period will be no later than five years after the end of the first reporting period (1st January 2026).

5.0 Biodiversity Net Gain

As a Local Planning Authority, North Herts Council is also required to report on Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). BNG is an approach to development, made mandatory by the Environment Act 2021. It requires most new developments to deliver at least a 10% increase in biodiversity, compared to the site's pre-development biodiversity value. Major developments have been subject to the requirement since February 2024, whilst smaller developments have been subject to the requirement since April 2024.

5.1 BNG Monitoring

No BNG monitoring has yet been undertaken. BNG became mandatory in February 2024 and since then the council has discharged 9 Biodiversity Gain Plans. Within these a total of 25.41 Habitat units & 2.6 Hedgerow units are expected to be delivered and maintained over 30 years. However, it is worth noting that 0.32 Habitat units are offsite, being sourced by the applicant in Lincolnshire due to the absence of biodiversity unit availability in Hertfordshire at the time.

24.77 Habitat units and 2.52 Hedgerow units are classed as significant and secured via Section 106 (s106) with a Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan (HMMP).

Monitoring of BNG will be undertaken on sites with HMMPs in place in due course. As of 1st January 2026 no HMMPs have commenced.

5.2 Supporting local BNG delivery

In this reporting period, North Herts Council have been approached by two potential habitat bank providers and are looking to enter s106 agreements with them to enable BNG delivery locally.

Cabinet also approved progressing with plans to improve management of land at Radburn Way, Letchworth. This is a traditional orchard habitat with the potential to provide biodiversity units for North Herts Council use or as a habitat bank. Officers from Greenspace, Estates, and other service areas work jointly to manage and deliver the project, reporting back to the Executive Members for Enterprise, Resources, and Environment.

5.3 Delivering BNG in the next reporting period

Over the next reporting period, we will continue working to deliver BNG. Upcoming action includes integrating reference to the Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) within the new Local Plan currently being prepared; and procuring Mycelia software to enable ease of interrogation of Biodiversity Metric Data for BNG assessments.

6.0 Conclusion

During this reporting period, North Herts Council has made progress towards its biodiversity objective through delivery of a range of actions. This has included improvements to council-owned greenspaces; working in partnership with other organisations on projects such as the bee corridor to improve or link up habitats across our district; developing improved communications on biodiversity; and helping to enable local delivery of biodiversity net gain through support for habitat bank creation. The integration of biodiversity commitments into a broader Sustainability Strategy signals biodiversity as a key component of the council's sustainability ambitions. We will continue working to progress the biodiversity initiatives outlined in this report and monitor them alongside our wider environmental commitments.