**Briefing Paper for Councillors: Opportunities for working together on Nature Recovery Projects for**

**Haslemere**

***Prepared by the Haslemere Biodiversity Group (HBG)***

**Background**

The Environment Act 2021 introduced a newly-strengthened Biodiversity Duty for public authorities with detailed government guidance published in May 2023[[1]](#footnote-2). For Haslemere Town Council this duty is relevant for the property owned and/or maintained such as allotments, parks, sports fields, amenity spaces and verges.

Under the Environment Act 2021, Surrey County Council (SCC) is appointed as the designated responsible authority tasked with the job of developing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Surrey and related activities. Early discussions between SCC and the HBG have taken place to ensure that the HBG’s work is aligned with the SCC’s approach. Essentially, the HBG is a bottom up approach from the community working with the statutory body and in alignment with government policy and good practice to embed this work at local level. Analogies with the model of working on the Neighbourhood Plan and feeding into District Planning policy can be seen.

Haslemere’s unique natural landscape and wildlife are highly valued by its residents. Public consultations carried out during preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan confirmed that protection and enhancement of these natural assets was seen as a high priority.

The Haslemere Biodiversity Group (HBG) is here to help and we’d like to start a conversation as to how we could work together to assist HTC in delivering its Biodiversity Duty as required under the Environment Act as well as its Climate and Biodiversity Emergency Motion commitments. This paper sets out some specific proposals on the type of help and support we could offer and the potential benefits to the Council and the local community.

**Potential opportunities for working together**

1. **Baseline biodiversity audits to assess current condition and status of HTC-owned/managed sites and identify opportunities for enhancements**

A baseline biodiversity audit involves undertaking an ecological survey to assess the current condition and status of biodiversity on a particular site. Such information is an essential first step in determining how best to conserve and enhance the biodiversity value of that site.

We are not aware of any biodiversity audits for the green spaces owned and managed by Haslemere Town Council except for the work done on the community orchard space on Lion Green in 2021 and 2023. The HBG can provide direct assistance to HTC through the provision of ecological surveys, review existing management plans and identify opportunities for enhancing biodiversity on individual sites. We can also undertake an assessment of the biodiversity unit gain potential using Defra’s Biodiversity Metric. This work would be carried out by a professional ecologist.

The main findings would be presented in a report to HTC. It would, of course, be entirely at the discretion of HTC to decide whether they wish to proceed with HBG's recommendations. If changes to land management are implemented, we can provide a follow up monitoring service to assess the impact of the changes.

***Benefits to HTC and the community:***

Baseline biodiversity data for key sites will:

* Enable development of policies and plans to conserve and enhance biodiversity on land owned or managed by HTC;
* Support reporting of progress in meeting HTC’s Biodiversity Duty and its Climate and Biodiversity Emergency commitments;
* Identify potential opportunities for additional income from selling biodiversity units to developers.[[2]](#footnote-3)

1. **Identification of partnership projects and funding opportunities to conserve and enhance Haslemere’s biodiversity**

With HBG's extensive network, we are able to identify funding sources and projects that can improve biodiversity in our town. Such projects can not only deliver clear benefits for local wildlife but can also benefit the physical and mental wellbeing of residents through community engagement.

We look for opportunities to collaborate with other organisations to share resources and costs on projects. One such example is the award-winning ‘B-Lines’ project run by the conservation charity Buglife UK and Spaces4Nature[[3]](#footnote-4). As Haslemere lies at the centre of a significant B-line, the HBG invited Louis Harrington-Edmans from Buglife UK to give a presentation about the B-Lines project to a diverse audience of interested parties that included local Councillors, conservation/environmental groups and residents association members in May 2023. Following the meeting, work was done to identify suitable sites across Haslemere that could meet the eligibility criteria for B-Lines project support. The list included 3 council owned/managed sites: Churt Road verge, Sturt Farm SANG and Memorial Recreation Ground.

In July, Louis returned to visit the candidate sites and subsequently provided us with an initial assessment of these sites including details of enhancements that could be made with estimated costs. Further follow up discussions were held with key stakeholders representing individual sites. Details of the proposed schemes and the current status of discussions regarding each site are provided in Appendix 1.

In summary, the National Trust, owners of the Churt Road verge, is keen to proceed with a partnership agreement with Buglife on this site. A comprehensive public consultation will be carried out to inform and engage the local community. HTC support for and participation in this project is requested – see Appendix 1 for further details. While clear opportunities have been identified to improve biodiversity on both the Sturt Farm SANG and the Memorial Recreation Ground sites, progression of B-Lines projects on these sites cannot proceed at this time pending resolution of various issues relating to site ownership and other matters and the timescale for applying for/securing Buglife funding. Nevertheless, both sites offer clear opportunities for future partnership projects.

***Benefits to HTC and the community:***

Partnership projects will:

* Facilitate sharing of resources and costs in enhancing the biodiversity value of the town’s green spaces;
* Raise awareness of local biodiversity issues and actions;
* Encourage local community engagement and support physical and mental wellbeing of residents.

1. **Nature Recovery Strategy**

The HBG will deliver a Nature Recovery Strategy and Action Plan for our town next year. This is being developed in close consultation with a wide range of stakeholders and will align with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy that Surrey County council expect to deliver towards the end of 2024. Our Action Plan will identify opportunities, priorities and actions for nature recovery and will include these B-line projects in addition to numerous other ideas directed towards restoring, extending and enhancing important wildlife sites and habitats and creating new wildlife rich habitats. Delivery of the Action Plan will be a town-wide effort involving local residents, landowners, local societies and groups, regional organisations (e.g. Surrey Wildlife Trust, Surrey CPRE), national organisations (e.g. National Trust, Space4Nature) and public bodies. The HBG will coordinate and monitor the delivery of the Action Plan.

***Benefits to HTC and the local community***

* A clear strategy and action plan for conserving and enhancing the town’s unique and rich biodiversity assets for wildlife and people over the long term;
* A contribution to wider environmental goals (e.g. better water quality, flood management, improved resilience to climate change, pollution, development and non-native species etc.);
* Opportunities for local groups and individuals to directly get involved in local projects that benefit local wildlife.
* A significant contribution to nature recovery at county and national level .

**Funding**

The Amenities Committee should be aware that HBG has applied to HTC for £10,000 of funding for 2024 against budgeted costs of £35,000. Much of our work is carried out by volunteers for no cost but it is necessary for us to employ professional ecologists and researchers to assist in the writing of the Nature Recovery Strategy and provide the expertise needed for our projects.

**Appendix 1**

**Opportunities for B-Lines projects on HTC-owned or managed sites: latest status and plans**

***Churt Road verge***

This site is owned by the National Trust but the grass has been regularly strimmed over recent years by HTC contractors.

The National Trust management is keen to proceed with the Buglife proposal which would entail creation of a central grass verge seeded with an appropriate wildflower mix including yellow rattle and bordered by cut strips of grass (1-1.5m wide) running along the tarmac path next to the road and a wider strip (1.5-2m wide) along the edge of Golden Valley. Planting yellow rattle will deter the tall grasses and thereby prevent issues with sight lines close to the road and an overall untidy appearance.

An extensive consultation exercise is planned to inform and engage local residents and community groups with this project. Details have yet to be finalised but are likely to include signage on the site, fliers to local residents/community boards, articles in local newspapers and presentations/discussion at any relevant community fora (e.g. local Councillor surgeries, Blackdown and Hindhead Supporters Group etc.). Other towns have added signage with QR codes, where wildflower areas have been established, to ensure visitors understand the benefits and this could also be an option.[[4]](#footnote-5) Consultation will take place throughout the duration of the project with the local community encouraged to provide ideas and feedback. Surrey CC will also be consulted to ensure the proposed changes are not harmful to road users.

The costs of establishing and maintaining the wildflower area will be borne by Buglife and the National Trust. HTC currently maintain the whole verge so there would be changes to the management plan but, given that the area requiring strimming would be significantly reduced, there should be cost savings.

The National Trust, as owners of the site, will enter into an agreement with Buglife to maintain the site for 10 years, as such the wildflower areas will be actively managed thereby preventing it from appearing unkept.

It is worth noting that the town has already successfully implemented a wildflower area, including a cut and collect regime, at the Lion Green Orchard space. Surveys of the site in July 2021, before measures were imposed, and in February 2023 demonstrated an improvement in the biodiversity of the area when compared with the surrounding space. The scheme has generally received a positive response from the local community.

***Sturt Farm SANG***

The potential for improving the biodiversity value of this site is very high. The area contains some notable floral and invertebrate species but has not been particularly well maintained in the past. Louis proposed a cut and collect regime and yellow rattle establishment to significantly improve floral and invertebrate diversity of grassland areas. However, HTC has yet to take over the leasehold for this site pending resolution of a number of issues with the developer and Waverley Borough Council. It seems unlikely that these will be resolved in time to take advantage of the Buglife funding scheme but opportunities for similar projects/partnerships may well arise in the future.

***Memorial Recreation Ground***

The scheme proposed by Buglife included small low mow areas around the playing field, introduction of yellow rattle in these areas and the creation of a wildflower bund adjacent to the car park.

An extensive consultation with the many different users of this site as well as neighbours and other community groups would be required before the project proposals could be progressed. This site currently sits within Waverley's portfolio and although it has been agreed that HTC will take over the site, the relevant paperwork has not yet been finalised with no clear handover date agreed so far. Again, it seems unlikely that ownership will be transferred in time to progress a Buglife partnership but opportunities remain for similar projects in future.

1. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/complying-with-the-biodiversity-duty

   Public authorities must:

   * Consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
   * Agree policies and specific objectives based on their consideration.
   * Act to deliver their policies and achieve their objectives.

   This duty applies to a public authority, such as a:

   * government department or public body
   * local authority or local planning authority
   * statutory undertaker - a business that has public authority duties for their land and delivers something of public importance.

   See also https://www.slcc.co.uk/new-government-guidance-on-biodiversity/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. From late 2023, all planning permissions granted in England will be legally required to deliver a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain (BNG). If BNG cannot be achieved on the development site, there are opportunities to deliver BNG off-site through a credits system. Landowners including local authorities have the opportunity to gain income for delivering this off-site BNG on their land through options such as habitat banking or through selling biodiversity units to developers. A baseline ecological survey needs to be undertaken on the land in question before BNG can be delivered. The habitats would also need to be secured for 30 years, and would need to show evidence of restoration and enhancement. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.buglife.org.uk/our-work/b-lines/>. B-Lines are a series of ‘insect superhighways' running throughout the UK that aim to restore and create a network of wildflower-rich habitat stepping stones and support declining populations of pollinating insects and other wildlife. Numerous stakeholders are currently working in partnership with Buglife across the country to enhance these stepping stones with funding support available for local projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://www.harborough.gov.uk/info/20007/environmental\_services/482/wildflowers [↑](#footnote-ref-5)