



Horsham
District
Council

Draft Greenspace Strategy 2024-29

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Foreword:

from Portfolio holder (s)?

Context:

Overview of estate:

Horsham District Council owns and manages approximately 400 ha of greenspace across the District. This estate includes formal parks and recreation grounds, woodland, heathland, veteran trees, water bodies, cemeteries, allotments, and playgrounds.

There are over 200 separate sites, with a concentration in and around Horsham Town. About half of the land is managed under a grounds maintenance contract, with a separate arboricultural contract for our tree stock. The larger sites which have significant wildlife value are managed in-house.

The Council has a Parks and Countryside team, which at time of writing, has 16.2 FTE staff carrying out a diverse range of duties from practical estate management and grave digging to tree inspections, contract management and working with volunteers. Many of the sites have active community involvement and a number have 'Friends of' groups.

Strategic context

The Council Strategy 2023-27 is based around four key priorities:

- Supporting People and Communities
- Inspiring Greener Futures
- Building a Thriving Local Economy
- Always learning, Listening, and Improving

In 2023 the Council declared a climate and ecological emergency for Horsham District. This gave added weight to the target of becoming a net zero district by 2050, and for the Council's direct emissions to be net zero by 2030, but it also seeks to deliver more climate change adaptation and resilience, including provision of better-connected habitats and more green space. The role of green spaces in tackling climate change is reflected in the Climate Action Strategy and includes the production of this Strategy as a short-term action.

The Horsham District Local Plan Regulation 19 contains policies addressing open space, biodiversity net gain, the wider countryside, and trees. It is underpinned by a Green Infrastructure (GI) strategy, which sets out clear guidance to ensure and protect urban greenspace.

The Open Space, Sports, and Recreation review (OSSR 2021) identifies the type, quantity, and quality of open space provision across the District and highlights existing deficiencies against current and future populations. The Play Strategy 2017-27 sets out the importance of open space and high-quality play and youth facilities in children's and young people's development. There is also a Playing Pitch Strategy which is due for review in 2024-25 which considers the provision of sports field provision.

Wilder Horsham District is an innovative partnership with Sussex Wildlife Trust which aims to deliver a Nature Recovery Network across the District working with farmers, parish councils and community groups, as well as enhancing the wildlife value of our own estate. This Nature Recovery Network will feed into the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for West Sussex.

Horizon scanning

Looking forward, three issues seem likely to impact on HDC's greenspaces over the next two decades and beyond. The first is growth of population within the District. The total number of residents is forecast to increase by 15.7% from 142,217 to 164,646 by 2037 (ONS 2018). This will mean an increase in visitors to

existing sites with impacts on wear and tear, erosion and disturbance. However there will also be additional greenspaces within new housing developments.

Linked to this is the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain, brought in by the Environment Act 2021, to ensure there is no loss of wildlife value when land is built on. A financial value is placed on different habitats and there is a developing market in Biodiversity Units.

Finally, there are the immediate impacts of climate change. 2022 saw the hottest summer ever recorded in the UK and globally 2023 was confirmed as the warmest calendar year on record, with a global average temperature 1.48°C warmer than the 1850-1900 pre-industrial level. The annual average rainfall recorded at the nearest Met office weather station (Charlwood, Surrey) between 1961-1990 was 770mm of rain a year. Between 1991-2020 the average was 833mm.

This brings the risk of both summer heatwaves and drought as well as wetter winters leading to waterlogging of soil and surface water flooding. In time, habitats will change as plants change their distribution and abundance, challenged by drought stress and waterlogged soils. The climate is changing faster than some species can evolve to cope with it, leading to local extinctions. Some new species will however migrate northwards and become naturalized.

Ornamental horticulture, street trees and turf management will face the same difficulties, creating maintenance issues and necessitating changes from what is currently viewed as standard practice. We have already seen losses to our planting because of these impacts.

Vision:

To ensure that Horsham District Council's Greenspaces are protected for future generations and managed to provide good quality public greenspace for amenity and leisure use, as well as maximising its value for biodiversity, climate mitigation and adaptation.

Strategic Priorities:

This strategy has been developed around the following strategic priorities:

- Protect, maintain, and enhance existing greenspaces to a good standard.
- Provide a range of opportunities for amenity and leisure use for all sectors of society.
- Sites will be managed sustainably and seek to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience.
- Greenspace and facilities in new developments should meet the principles for amenity and biodiversity value.
- Volunteer groups' input into the Council's greenspaces is valued, supported, and encouraged.

Each of these principles is expanded below, with both strategic and operational outputs identified.

Implementation for each priority is contained in an action plan which will be reviewed and updated annually and presented to Cabinet.

1. Protect, maintain, and enhance existing greenspaces to a good standard.

The Council manages many public greenspaces most of which serve a range of different purposes – for general leisure use, exercise and play, sports pitch and playground provision, landscaping around development and wildlife habitats. Our greenspaces play a key role in place-shaping and sense of community. The Council sites range from large formal parks to cemeteries to pockets of open space within housing estates.

Table1 – sites by function

Typology	Primary purpose
Parks and gardens	Urban parks, country parks and formal gardens, open to the general public. Accessible, high-quality opportunities for informal recreation and community events.
Natural and semi-natural greenspaces	Supports wildlife conservation, biodiversity and environmental education and awareness.
Amenity greenspace	Opportunities for informal activities close to home or work or enhancement of the appearance of residential or other areas.
Provision for children and young people	Areas designed primarily for play and social interaction involving children and young people.
Allotments	Opportunities to grow own produce. Added benefits include the long-term promotion of sustainable living, health, and social inclusion.

Sites can be grouped by their size, location, and accessibility as well as their value within the Nature Recovery Network and their importance to residents. (see table 2 below)

Table 2 – Sites grouped according to significance.

Definition	Name of site
Strategic Site	Horsham Park, Warnham Nature Reserve, Chesworth Farm, Southwater Country Park, Owlbeech & Leechpool Woods, Hills Cemetery, Monkmead Woods, Henfield Commons, Sandgate Park, Bramber Brooks
Neighbourhood Site	Roffey Rec, Bennetts Field, Trafalgar Rec, Victory Rd Rec, Needles Field, Denne cemetery, Chennells Brook Castle; Highwood Hill, Fletchers Croft Some fragmented sites will have a single management approach e.g., River Stor corridor and Millpond, Storrington: North Horsham Woodland
Local site	All other sites e.g., New Street garden, Horsham, Deer Park open space, Henfield

The sites' level of maintenance will be appropriate to their status and function, but all sites should be clean, safe and welcoming. Not all sites are visited by staff on a regular basis, so the Council is dependent on reporting from residents if there are issues. A dedicated phone number and email address are monitored daily. Officers also maintain close contact with community wardens, volunteers, Friends' groups, Neighbourhood and Parish councils, who all help act as eyes and ears on the ground. Parks & Countryside staff work with our community wardens and the police to address anti-social behaviour.

Our Strategic sites should all have a management plan and will have higher levels of direct input from officers, whilst our Neighborhood and local sites are for the most part, managed through our grounds maintenance contract, but may have a Friends group or receive practical volunteer support.

The Council fully understands the value that our parks and open spaces add to our communities and note that some authorities are working with Fields in Trust to put specific protections on open spaces to protect them in perpetuity. A review our sites will be undertaken to consider which may be suitable to submit to Fields in Trust.

Actions

- Continue to ensure effective contract management through use of KPIs and good communication with the contractors.
- Findings from annual play and infrastructure inspections to be actioned in accordance with their risk levels.
- Quarterly review of s.106 funding opportunities.
- Identify potential projects for annual capital bids programme.
- Undertake a review of our parks and open spaces to identify which may be appropriate for further protection through Fields in Trust.

2. Greenspaces have significant value for public health and wellbeing and should provide a range of opportunities for amenity and leisure use.

The importance of greenspaces for public health and wellbeing is supported by academic research. Greenspaces provide places for everyone to spend time outdoors – to spend time together outside of the constraints of home, school, and work. They are somewhere to walk the dog, to relax in, and exercise, even without provision of further facilities such as the provision of play or youth equipment, the marking of football pitches or outdoor gym equipment to cater for specific activities. Our sites tend to be multi-functional by default.

The OSSR sets out guidance on the minimum amount of accessible amenity greenspace, of play provision and allotment sites that should be provided within residential areas per head of population.

A key principle is that the play and youth provision in our Parks are '*free of charge, where users are free to come and go and free to choose what they do whilst there*'. (HDC Play Strategy 2017)

It is important therefore to ensure that design guidance is flexible and there is scope for delivering new types of space for young people which are both sport and non-sport focused. We design new spaces to be inclusive for all and try to ensure there is a good distribution across the District of play equipment which is accessible for children with disabilities.

It is important that our sites should be accessible to as many people as possible. However, it is not just about minimizing physical barriers. We should seek to improve public awareness and understanding of how and why we manage them. We undertake a process of public information or consultation before making significant changes to a site.

It is also about trying to offer a welcome - people should feel comfortable to use greenspaces and we should provide a range of events and activities. Our greenspaces act as a venue for diverse external providers, such as circuses, outdoor music events through to art classes and sound-baths. We will also organise and deliver events ourselves, ranging from the Horsham Park Skate Jam to bird-ringing, and outdoor theatre for children.

However, we do have to recognise that there are increasing pressures on our parks and open spaces. In the last 10 years we have seen an increasing population, not just of humans, but of dogs as well. There are requirements to support biodiversity, requests to provide areas for outdoor education and dog parks, a rise

in the number and range of personal trainers and commercial dogwalkers as well as opportunities for new catering concessions and one-off hires of greenspace for both public and private events.

Although we will do our best to accommodate everyone, not all sites are suitable for all activities. Much of the value of the Parks and Countryside estate is the individuality of sites with many special and unique locations. For example, Warnham Local Nature Reserve does not allow dogs on-site, and is managed primarily for its wildlife value. However, across the estate, there should be something for everyone.

Actions:

- Phased programme of play and youth facility improvements, year on year, to ensure best play value.
- Improvement to signage and interpretation across our estate, especially in the Neighbourhood sites
- Communication of high profile works with on-site signage and social media posts, and other appropriate communication channels.
- Organisation of events to highlight / promote facilities e.g., Love Parks week, Skate Jam
- Collaboration with colleagues to promote a health and wellbeing agenda. Input into the Playing Pitch strategy. Be open to opportunities such as social prescribing, forest bathing, therapeutic horticulture, or community growing spaces.

3. Sites will be managed sustainably and seek to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience

The Council has a significant and varied land holding including sites very important for wildlife (see table below). Our large semi-natural sites make up just over half of Council owned greenspace (213 ha out of 400ha total) and have been managed for many years to increase their biodiversity.

Table 3 –Sites with wildlife designations

Site	Significance for wildlife
	Key: LNR = Local Nature Reserve; LWS = Local Wildlife Site; SSSI = site of special scientific interest; BAP = national Biodiversity Action Plan
Warnham Nature Reserve	LNR, LWS, BAP priority habitats – lowland meadow, deciduous woodland, ponds
Chesworth Farm	LWS, BAP priority habitat – lowland meadow
Owlbeech & Leechpool Woods	LWS, BAP priority habitats - lowland heath, lowland deciduous woodland
Southwater Country Park	LWS
Monkmead Woods	SSSI, BAP habitat wet woodland
Henfield, Broadmere & Oreham Commons	LWS, BAP
Sandgate Park	BAP habitat – lowland heath
Bramber Brooks	LWS, BAP habitat – floodplain grazing marsh

There are several underlying drivers that inform our approach. The Lawton Report 2010 articulated importance ecological principles, best known as ‘bigger, better, more and joined up’. This means that areas of habitat need to be larger, they need in the best condition possible, there needs to restoration or

recreation of habitat to increase the overall area and they need to connect, or at least the gaps between them minimized. This approach to landscape resilience has resulted in the concept of Nature Recovery Networks (NRN), that have been enshrined in law through the Environment Act 2021.

This is underlined by our commitment to the Wilder Horsham District (WHD) project. This is an ambitious partnership between the Council and Sussex Wildlife Trust to increase biodiversity across the District, both working with private landowners and internally. One of its objectives was to:

Incorporate the Council estate into the Nature Recovery Network and the principles of landscape resilience”

Much of our own land is valuable for wildlife but fragmented or isolated from the wider landscape. By linking with landowners adjoining or near to the Council holdings we become part of those larger corridors of habitat.

Management plans set out a series of actions to maintain and enhance the site. But these will always be treated as guidance, rather than regulations, to ensure that sites can be managed flexibly and creatively in response to extremes of weather, new evidence that alters our understanding of the site or unforeseen circumstances.

All of the strategic sites listed above should have current management plans, setting out both the long-term approach for the site, but also an annual action plan to show expected outputs. At present not all of our sites do have existing plans, so these will be replaced through a rolling programme. (see table 4 below)

Table 4 – Strategic Site Management Plans

Current Management Plans	Dates
Henfield Common	2018-28
Chesworth Farm	2019 -26
Horsham Park	2021-24
Broadmare Common	2022-32
Warnham (in draft)	2024-34
Sites without current plans	
Sandgate Park	scheduled to be written 2027
Owlbeech & Leechpool	scheduled to be written 2024-25 *
Southwater CP	scheduled to be written 2025-26
Monkmead Woods	scheduled to be written 2027 *
Oreham Common	2017 survey gave management guidance. New plan 2027
Highwood Hill	HDC ownership from 2024 – plan to be developed in 2025-26
Bramber Brooks	HDC ownership from 2024 – plan to be developed in 2025-26

*For the wooded sites we will be using the Forestry Commission’s Woodland Management Plan template, to bring our approach in line with a national standard.

The concept of rewilding is widely used, but simply means trying to allow or restore as many different natural processes to a site as possible. On our sites, which are all relatively small, rewilding opportunities are more limited than at a landscape scale and will always require human oversight. Again, this is where linking with neighbouring land and into the wider Nature Recovery Network can bring advantages.

For example, we use livestock to graze some of our grass and heath lands, which has worked well within the limitations of our current herd and resources. There are opportunities to extend or vary our approach to maximise the benefits for the habitat e.g., by introducing other species, such as pigs or horses, or to use

pulsed or mob grazing to replicate wild herbivores. This will be considered by a review of our grazing management approach which will take place in 2024.

The Council will also need to be taking a more proactive approach to our tree management, rather than just managing individual trees that present a risk to the public or property. This might include using traditional forms of management such as coppicing and pollarding - as well as looking to create specimens which have some of the features of veteran trees which benefit wildlife. We will be developing a holistic Woodland Management Plan for the fragmented areas of woodland in north Horsham.

Species re-introduction is the most well-known rewilding activity. Beavers are drivers of significant wetland change and have already been reintroduced in several places in Sussex and surrounding counties. Similarly, there is a project looking at the viability of Pine Marten re-introduction in the Ashdown Forest in the near future. We should consider the potential for re-introductions on our sites, perhaps starting with a review of the scope for a beaver re-introduction. We should also not just concentrate on the 'charismatic' species, but also consider whether there is scope to assist other species such as invertebrates.

However, all of our land has some value for wildlife, not just our 'countryside' sites and we should strive to enhance them all, whilst also maintaining their amenity value. In 2024 we be reviewing some of the long-standing horticultural practices to consider the cessation or minimization of unsustainable operations such as use of pesticides, herbicides and peat and maximise opportunities to enhance biodiversity through changes in management including adjusting the mowing regime.

When planning new plantings, we prioritise pollinators through the choice of species in our flower and shrub beds. It is important to provide a range of flowering plants to provide pollen and nectar for bumblebees, moths, solitary bees, hoverflies, and beetles, through the whole growing season. In ornamental settings, this will include a range of non-native planting which can be beneficial for many pollinators and create long-season displays. This is especially important for the selection of tree species which will be part of the landscape for decades to come.

Actions

- Programme to develop management plans for all strategic sites, adopting standard Woodland Management Plan approach for wooded sites.
- Implement agreed mowing regime changes as part of 'Wildways' project.
- Review of livestock grazing with recommendations.
- Review pesticide, herbicide and peat use and make recommendations.
- Gain better understanding about the design and implementation of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDs) and understand how and where our sites can contribute to 'slowing the flow' approach of holding water back in the landscape.
- Seek financial support for management via agri-environment grants or other funding.

4. New greenspace and facilities should meet the principles for amenity and biodiversity value.

New greenspaces are usually created as part of residential development, and dependent on the size of the scheme may come with parks, sport, play or youth facilities. This is determined through the planning process, with reference to guidance such as the OSSR (2021). The Parks and Countryside team comment on significant planning applications and give advice on design and layout of greenspaces and their associated facilities. We seek to address local need and maximise opportunity for creative forward-thinking designs. The new greenspaces may be passed to the Council or to the appropriate Parish Council or may be managed by an independent management company.

The Council does not actively seek to purchase new sites. However, the Council will continue to take an active interest in the developing nature and carbon markets which can pay for improvements to biodiversity and climate mitigation and adaptation. As this market matures this may influence the Councils approach to purchasing or acquiring land.

Actions

- Parks and Countryside continue to input into planning proposals for developments which create new greenspace.
- Seek opportunities for gain benefit from the developing markets in Biodiversity Net Gain and Carbon Credits, and other Ecosystem Services.
- Ensure new cemetery in Mowbray, North Horsham is open in 2030.

5. Volunteer groups' input into the Council's greenspaces is valued, supported, and encouraged

The Council recognises and is very grateful for the significant volunteer input it receives across its greenspaces. In 2022 an estimated 19,000 hours were contributed from the following volunteer and Friends groups: Alder Copse, Boldings Brook, Friends of Warnham, Friends of Chesworth, Friends of Horsham Park, Gatwick Greenspace, Green Gym, Hills Farm Lane, Meadowside, Nuthatch Way, Sandgate Park, and Victory Road Rec, but does not include individual acts of litter-picking etc.

The National Lottery values volunteer time at £20 per hour, so this equates to a notional value of £380,000 of activity over the year across the Council's estate.

However, volunteering is not cost free and requires a significant resource of officer time to direct and support the volunteer groups' energies. We must work effectively to ensure volunteers enjoy and understand what they are doing and that they are working safely.

Actions

- Ensure our working practice is aligned with the outcomes of the Volunteering internal audit report and Community Services guidance.
- All volunteers have annual training for Health and Safety and good working practice. Provide additional training to enhance delivery. Organise an annual volunteer 'thank-you' event.
- Continue to engage with and support community groups such as Wild about Warnham, Billi-Green, Greening Steyning and the Horsham Greenspaces Forum.

6. Action Plan (for 2024-25)

1. Protect, maintain, and enhance existing greenspaces to a good standard				
Action	Timescale	Responsibility	Supporting Teams	Lead Cabinet Member
Ensure effective contract management through use of KPIs and good communication with the contractors	Quarterly meetings	P&C Manager	Parks Operations Manager Tree Officer	Portfolio holder for Leisure, Culture & Greenspaces
Findings from annual play and infrastructure inspections to be actioned in accordance with their risk levels	Ongoing	Parks Operations Manager	Park Rangers	Portfolio holder for Leisure, Culture & Greenspaces
Quarterly review of s.106 funding opportunities	Quarterly	P&C Development Manager	P&C team leaders	
Identify potential projects for annual capital programme	October 24 Improvement to Southwater CP toilet block December 24	P&C Manager	P&C team leaders	
Undertake a review of our parks and open spaces to identify which may be appropriate for further protection through Fields in Trust	???	P&C Manager	P&C team leaders	
2. Greenspaces have significant value for public health and wellbeing and should provide a range of opportunities for amenity and leisure use.				
Action	Timescale	Responsibility	Supporting Teams	Lead Cabinet Member
Phased programme of play and youth facility improvements, year on year, to ensure best play value. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holbrook East Cedar Drive Carpenters Meadow Ostlers View 	Jul 24 Jul 24 March 25 March 25	P&C Development Manager	Parks Operations Manager	
Improvement to signage and interpretation across our estate, especially in the Neighbourhood sites	Denne Cemetery sign and trail- June 24 Bramber Brooks June 24 Highwood Hill – Oct 24	Visitor Experience Officer	P&C team leaders	
Communication of high profile works with on-site signage and social media	Ongoing	Visitor Experience Officer	P&C team leaders	

posts, and other appropriate communication channels.				
Organisation of events to highlight / promote facilities	School holiday events – Feb / April / Oct Skate Jam - June 24. Love Parks week July 24	Visitor Experience Officer	P&C team leaders	
Collaboration with colleagues to promote a health and wellbeing agenda. Input into the Playing Pitch strategy. Be open to opportunities such as social prescribing, forest bathing, therapeutic horticulture, or community growing spaces.	Ongoing	P&C Manager	-	
3. Sites will be managed sustainably and seek to enhance biodiversity and climate resilience				
Action	Timescale	Responsibility	Supporting Teams	Lead Cabinet Member
Programme to develop management plans for all strategic sites, adopting standard Woodland Management Plan approach for wooded sites	Owlbeech & Leechpool Woods plan March '25	Tree Officer / Countryside Manager	-	
Restoration of natural processes to be a guiding principle in management considerations	Ongoing	P&C Manager	Countryside Manager	
Implement agreed mowing regime changes as part of 'Wildways' project, in 2024	March '24	P&C Manager	Parks Operations Manager	
Review of livestock grazing with recommendations in 2024	Dec 24	P&C Manager	Countryside Manager	
Review pesticide and peat use and make recommendations	July 24	P&C Manager	P&C team leaders	
Seek financial support for management via agri-environment grants or other funding. New greenspace and facilities should meet the principles for amenity and biodiversity value.	Ongoing	Countryside Manager Parks Development Manager	-	
4. New greenspace and facilities should meet the principles for amenity and biodiversity value.				
Action	Timescale	Responsibility	Supporting Teams	Lead Cabinet Member
Parks and Countryside continue to input into planning proposals for developments which create new greenspace.	ongoing	Parks Development Manager	P&C team leaders	

Seek opportunities for gain benefit from the developing markets in Biodiversity Net Gain and Carbon Credits, and other Ecosystem Services	Ongoing	Head of Service	P&C Manager, Countryside Manager	
Ensure new cemetery in Mowbray, North Horsham is open in 2030	Ongoing	P& C Manager	Parks Operations Manager, Planning Projects team	
5. Volunteer groups' input into the Council's greenspaces is valued, supported, and encouraged				
Ensure our working practice is aligned with the outcomes of the Volunteering internal audit report and Community Services guidance	Nov 24	P&C Manager	P&C team leaders	
All volunteers have annual training for Health and Safety and good working practice. Provide additional training to enhance delivery. Organise an annual volunteer 'thank-you' event	Ongoing 'Thank you' event Sept. 24	P&C Manager	Countryside Manager, Parks Operations Manager	
Continue to engage with and support community groups such as Wild about Warnham, Billi-Green, Greening Steyning the Green Gym and the Horsham Greenspaces Forum.	Ongoing	P&C Manager	P&C team leaders	