

Proposal for the Biodiversity Task Force: Understanding the Districts' Biodiversity Resources

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As well as supporting the Joint Local Plan, the following recommendations are relevant in the light of the proposed planning reforms. I believe this work would greatly assist in understanding which areas should be 'protected' and 'enhanced' for wildlife and people. Further consideration would also establish the role of such areas in the wider ecological network.

Proposed outcomes:

- 1 Increase understanding of the District's Biodiversity Resources by updating the County Wildlife Site Register with a Condition Assessment. This would also support both LPAs' return to Defra on Government's Single Data List indicator 160-00 for Local Nature conservation/biodiversity.**
- 2 Evaluation of ecological assets within land within Public Realm and opportunities for enhancement.**
- 3 Initiate pilot mapping scheme to consider how all the sites with biodiversity value link into the wider ecological network.**

1 County Wildlife Sites

The hierarchy of sites of biodiversity value

In terms of its known biodiversity resource, within the Babergh-Mid Suffolk Districts there are statutory designated sites of international importance such as the Stour and Orwell Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar Site, Redgrave and Lopham Fens National Nature Reserve, part of the Waveney and Little Ouse Valley Fens Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a number of sites which are of national biodiversity importance, designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The ecological value of these sites is generally well understood.

There are also non-statutory designated sites. These are known as County Wildlife Sites (CWS), some of which may also be Roadside Nature Reserves (RNRs). Some of the CWSs are also designated as Local Nature Reserves by the local authority.

County Wildlife Sites - The rationale behind this non-statutory designation

County Wildlife Sites (CWSs) are areas known to be of county or regional importance for wildlife. The designation is non-statutory but is recognition of a site's high value for biodiversity. Suffolk Wildlife Trust, Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service (SBIS) and Natural England manage the Suffolk County Wildlife Site system in partnership.

- CWSs contain important resources of UK Priority Habitats and Species under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.
- CWSs complement the statutory protected areas and nature reserves by helping to buffer and maintain habitat links between these sites.

CWSs are implicitly recognised by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as having a fundamental role to play in meeting overall national biodiversity targets. In the NPPF 2019 they are described as 'Locally Designated Sites'. CWS are not protected by legislation, but their importance is recognised by local authorities when considering planning applications. Under current planning policy there is a presumption against granting permission for development that would have an adverse impact on a CWS.

The high wildlife value of many CWSs has developed through land management practices that have allowed wildlife to thrive, for example traditional and historical management such as rotational coppicing of woodland, hay cutting or grazing of grasslands. Ensuring the continuation of such appropriate management is vital to maintain the wildlife value of a site. Establishing and maintaining good working relationships with landowners and managers is therefore essential.

County Wildlife Sites: The resource

Suffolk currently has 934 County Wildlife Sites representing approximately 2.6% of the county's land area. They represent a mixture of woodlands, grasslands, wetlands including sections of rivers and also sites designated for their habitat mosaic. Woodlands, most of which are ancient, represent the majority of the sites.

With a register of over 900 sites, many of which were designated nearly 30 years ago, it is necessary to visit them on a rolling programme to assess whether they still maintain the features for which the site was originally designated. Where there has been a change, then there is also consideration whether the citation should be reviewed. There is also the opportunity at this stage to provide management advice to the landowners as required. Over the years, various local authorities have supported CWS surveys and management advice, with some additional 'seed' funding being provided by SBIS.

County Wildlife Sites in Babergh - Mid Suffolk

Achieving the best outcomes for biodiversity requires credible evidence derived from a site visit (ground-truthing) and justifiable choices based on ecological knowledge.

Babergh has 204 sites (covering 1714 hectares)
Mid Suffolk has 227 sites (covering 1367 hectares)

Of these there are **23** CWS in Babergh for which we have no recent information and **31** CWS in Mid Suffolk. These 67 sites are considered 'Red' priority because they have not been visited for a number of years, so their current biodiversity value is unknown. They also contain habitats other than woodland, so their potential for change through time is higher.

The list of potential sites is included in Appendix 1.

Proposed costs of site visits and reporting

The purpose of the site visit is to enable the following to be achieved:

- evaluate the current biodiversity value including priority habitats and species and position in the ecological network;
- provide a report with map, photos, summary of ecological assets and management advice as required to the CWS panel and the landowner.

To undertake the above would require at least a day per site. The site visits could be spread over more than one ecological survey season if necessary.

The costs for Suffolk Wildlife Trust, through its Trading Company (SWT Trading Ltd) to undertake each site visit and summary report is as follows:

Unit cost	Mid-Suffolk 'red list' CWS	Total cost exc VAT
£350	31	£10,850

SBIS has offered 'seed' funding of around £1000.

SWT contribution to the project **in addition** to the above would be to

- Arrange access to the site by finding out who landowner is and connecting them;
- Review the site's original citation and recommend amendments as required;
- Produce a summary condition assessment to the CWS panel;
- Provide management advice to landowners after survey to as required;
- Submit species records to SBIS.

2 Evaluation of assets within Public Realm sites

Following discussions with Will Burchnall (Corporate Manager – Public Realm), it was noted that there are over 600 public realm sites in Babergh (including some very small areas) and around 70 in Mid Suffolk.

It was agreed that focusing on the areas with high biodiversity potential in the first instance – which is probably the woodland – and to set a minimum area to cut down the numbers. Woodlands over 100m² number around 44, so as a contingency to allow for some additional sites, the list should be expanded to 50 public realm sites to be assessed (Final list to be supplied by Will Burchnall).

The following is recommended:

- Undertake site visit of selected public realm sites to assess current biodiversity value and opportunities for enhancement (which could include change in management or the site's capacity for additional tree planting)
- Provide a brief report for each site – approx ½-1 page of A4

The costs for Suffolk Wildlife Trust, through its Trading Company (SWT Trading Ltd) to undertake each site visit and summary report is as follows:

Unit cost	MidSuffolk Public Realm sites	Total cost exc VAT
£175	39	£6,825

The reduced cost is dependent on the above site visits being 'batched' with CWS surveys, thus reducing travel time and incorporated mileage costs.

3 Evaluation of Local Nature Reserves

The list of LNRs is shown in Appendix 1. Most of the LNRs are designated as CWS, two are SSSI.

Four LNRS are either part CWS or undesignated. It is recommended that these are assessed to see if they meet CWS criteria and also to assess how they contribute to the wider ecological network.

The following is recommended:

- Undertake site visit of selected non CWS or partly designated LNRs to assess current biodiversity value and opportunities for enhancement;
- Consider whether they meet CWS criteria and should be put before the CWS panel;
- Evaluate their role in the ecological network;
- Provide a brief report for each site with photos, map and text.

Unit cost	Mid Suffolk part or non-designated LNRs	Total cost exc VAT
£350	2	£700

4 Timing of work

It is anticipated that ecological surveys will commence from April 2021. However, if it is agreed that the project is to go ahead, then advance preparation work would take place to contact CWS landowners to request a site visit. Occasionally there can be a delay in finding out ownership.

Production of reports will take place up until Autumn 2021.

5 Mapping of sites and ecological networks

Martin Sanford, Manager at SBIS, is interested in being involved as a partnership project and start to draw together all the evidence relating to the statutorily designated sites, the CWSs and key public realm sites, as well as other important corridors in the landscape such wildlife corridors including rivers and other linear features.

By buffering the above sites, it would be possible to create a broad-brush map indicating areas that should be protected and where the key ecological networks are located. This would be very much an iterative process which could be updated as required as more information comes forward in future years.

Martin has indicated that the pilot to commence the above work could initially be undertaken within his current remit to support Babergh-Mid Suffolk District Councils.

Appendix 1

Mid Suffolk non-woodland CWSs not recently surveyed

Alderson Lake
Barham Pits
Baylham Churchyard
Baylham Fishpond
Broad Boarder
Chalkeith Road Meadow
Combs Lane Cornflower Site
Coronation Meadow
Creeping St Mary Meadows
Crowfield Churchyard
Cubitts Pit
Drinkstone Meadow
Fen Acre Meadow
Gt Blakenham Churchyard
Hall Farm Meadow (Wortham)
Hessett nature Reserve
Hoxne Meadow
Laxfield Cemetery
Manor Farm Meadows (Coddendam)
Railway Meadows (Thrandeston)
Rattlesden Airfield
Redgrave Lake
River Waveney Meadows
Sharmford Mere
Shrubland Park
Southolt Churchyard
Stradbroke Cemetery
Tassel Stonewort Site
Topcroft Farm Meadows
Turkey Hall Meadows
Westhorpe Green
Weybread Gravel Pits

Mid Suffolk LNRs

Church Meadows (CWS)
Fen Alder Carr (CWS)
Rede Wood (CWS)
Branford Meadows (CWS)

Needham Lakes - no designation
The Pennings, Eye - no designation