



Biodiversity

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1. What could biodiversity involve for the local authority?

(i) Providing leadership in the community

Authorities can show political leadership, increasing the profile of biodiversity across the authority's functions and facilitating partnerships with local organisations to work together to increase action on biodiversity.

(ii) Incorporating biodiversity into planning functions

As set out in PPS9, planning authorities should take steps to further the conservation status of habitats and species of principle importance for biodiversity where possible.

(iii) Sustainable Community Strategies & Local Area Agreements

Government guidance on Community Strategies suggests that local biodiversity objectives are considered within the local authority's Community Strategy.

Local Area Agreements provide an opportunity for local authorities to take action to deliver positive outcomes for biodiversity while also delivering cross-cutting benefits such as improved health, community cohesion and education for their local communities.

(iv) Management of local authority land holdings

Local authorities can manage their own sites in a way that is sensitive to biodiversity, for example, taking opportunities to enhance the sites' biodiversity interest and improving the amount and/or quality of greenspace available to their communities. This could include management of their land to help achieve agreed habitat and species targets, with support from the Local Biodiversity Partnership.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to achieve favourable condition of the SSSIs that they own. Many Local authorities own Local Nature Reserves that are designated for both wildlife and people and offer opportunities to study, learn about and enjoy wildlife. Local (wildlife) Sites are selected by local partnerships for their substantive nature conservation value. There are over 35,000 Local Sites in England, many of which are owned or controlled by local authorities.

(v) Use of information and data

Many local authorities already have access to species and habitat data, particularly in those areas covered by data repositories such as Local Record Centres (LRCs). In other areas there are good opportunities for local authorities to collaborate with local partners who also require biological data for the purpose of compliance with environmental standards.

2. Why is biodiversity important?

- Biodiversity is a core component of sustainable development, underpinning economic development, community well-being and local quality of life.
- It plays an important role in tackling climate change. The natural environment plays a vital role in helping to reducing the severity of climate change and minimising the impacts of climate change at both local and national levels.
- We rely on biodiversity for delivery of key services such as food production, provision of clean air and water, and flood management.

- Studies have shown that nature helps to enhance our physical and mental health, by encouraging outdoor recreation, exercise and relaxation.
- It can encourage social interaction between children and different communities. Local biodiversity projects offer opportunities to engage local communities and promote social inclusion.
- Protecting and enhancing the wildlife and natural habitats is important for its own sake

3. Background legislation and responsibilities

The **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill** has given all public bodies, including local authorities, a duty to have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in exercising their functions. The Duty aims to raise the profile of biodiversity across the public sector and ensure that biodiversity becomes a natural consideration in policy and decision-making. The Duty states that: "Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity"¹

Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation requires planners to not only protect biodiversity, but where possible to positively enhance it.

The **Town and Country Planning Regulations 1999** require an Environmental Impact Assessment to be carried out for certain types of major project which are judged likely to have significant environmental effects, before planning permission is granted.

The **Local Government Act 2000** requires local authorities to produce a community strategy for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area and DETR circular 04/2001 says that Local Biodiversity Action Plans are among the elements local authorities should build upon when preparing Community Strategies

4. The VISION - If all the innovative and good practice we know about was already happening in one geographical area (local authority) what would the area be like / look like?

This vision sketches how life might be in a typical suburb in Middle England in autumn 2010. The aim here is to illustrate simple actions for local authorities and their partners to take to improve and enhance biodiversity and thus quality of life.

A pleasant stroll through Anytown 2010 will, at first glance, leave the walker feeling that this town is like many others. On closer inspection, as a colourful butterfly floats in front of their face, visitors may notice that there is a little more birdsong in the air, streets are slightly greener and pocket parks seem to be everywhere.

Our stroller decides her legs deserve a break so she sits down outside the café in Queen's Park and orders a coffee. The owner of the café brings over the coffee, and, as business is quiet, sits down and starts to chat about the history of the park.

Apparently like many others, Queen's Park had a few years ago, fallen into a state of disrepair. Instead of being a lively, attractive space; the Park was barely used by anyone except local drunks and groups of youths who were accused of anti social behaviour. The planting had been damaged and the stream that ran through the middle of the park was home to shopping trolleys and carrier bags rather than fish and reed beds.

It wasn't until the Local Biodiversity Action Partnership (supported by the local authority) gave a grant to the Friends of Queen's Park Society that things started to look up. The Friend's first project was to set up a Community Clean Up Day which involved local enthusiasts removing the litter and debris from the park. The annual Clean-Up day continues to this day, but because of the major improvements to the park it is less of a litter picking exercise and more of a community celebration.

¹ Full text available on <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/bill/default.htm>

This year's event included a wildlife trail which led local children around the park and although it was educational it was more about getting the children away from the Playstation for an hour or so to enjoy the environment around them. The trail included little activity stations where the local authority sports development officer challenged the children to try and jump as far as a kangaroo and run as fast as a cheetah! Anytown Athletics Club now has two promising new members who said they had never even thought about joining an athletics club before.

The event attracted children from all around Anytown, the organisers said that it was really nice to see children from different schools and communities mixing well and making new friends. The parents had a less energetic time but still managed to make new friends and establish links between communities over a cup of coffee!

Since that first Clean Up Day, the Friends have continued to work with the LBAP and have made some minor changes which have led to major improvements for the local wildlife. In combination with the local authority ecologist, they drew up a biodiversity management plan for the park. As part of this they set aside an area of the park which they called the "WildSide"! By not cutting the grass and by planting native species of plants they have encouraged many more species of butterflies, insects, birds and mammals than the park had seen in decades. The WildSide approach has also been adopted by the Transport Department which is not cutting some hedgerows and footpaths to ensure that habitats for small mammals and birds are not destroyed.

The local authority is now preparing a bid to the Big Lottery Fund for resources to raise the standard of the park to Local Nature Reserve status. The Council have also applied for the park to be given the prestigious Green Flag award, which will place it amongst the best green spaces in the country.

Perhaps the biggest improvement has been changes in the stream. Once the trolleys and debris were removed an improvement plan was drawn up with a number of partners including the Environment Agency and the local bar which was situated a little upstream. The manager of the bar offered to put in a zero tolerance policy with drinkers who throw cigarette butts or beer mats into the river being thrown out of the bar. While this was a largely symbolic action it created media interest and added to a community belief that the local environment was worth caring about again.

The banks of the stream are now actively managed to encourage water voles and other small mammals as well as spawning areas for frogs and toads. The Environment Agency also suggested measures such as introducing tiny weevils to eat invasive water ferns which have helped to improve the water quality of the river and slowly species of fish have started to return. (Golborne Park, Wigan)

Sadly there is still the odd incident of littering and trolley tipping into the river, but they are much rarer now as the clean and attractive state of the park tends to dissuade all types of anti social behaviour. When incidents happen now, the local authority has committed to remove large items within 48 hours to ensure that the river is not allowed to deteriorate again. The removal of debris also means that the water can flow freely – by making sure any blockages are eliminated, so the likelihood of flooding has been drastically reduced.

Throughout the rest of the park the Friends have attached a bird box to every tree. Because natural habitats are being lost, bird boxes (of different types and sizes) are vital to ensure that different species of birds are able to nest. The friendly café owner said after the boxes were erected in the park, the local authority ecologist insured that bird boxes and bat boxes were attached to every council building, including schools. A sponsorship deal with the local garden centre meant that all council tenants received a voucher for a free bird box which led to over 300 bird boxes being put up in gardens.

As the coffee cup is steadily emptied, the café owner talks about the plans for the future. Apparently the Council has a section of biodiversity and other environmental strands within their community strategy and are bringing all the other local parks up to the quality of Queen's Park. The Council has recognised the benefits of biodiversity and believe that more people will be encouraged to live and set up businesses here because it is becoming known as a nice green area.

Our visitor to Anytown now decides she had better leave as she is meeting her friend by the train station in a few minutes. She remembers the last time she visited, she had asked directions and was told a short cut which she followed but wished she hadn't. The path took her around the back

of a supermarket loading bay where she was nearly run over and then down a long dark alley between shops and houses where she had felt distinctly unsafe. She was surprised then today to see a local authority sign post point her in the same direction.

The café owner explained that two years ago, the town centre had undergone a major refurbishment and the planners had taken the opportunity to redesign the layout of the town. They introduced green walkways around the town which are lined by trees and native planting, and avoid, where possible, crossing busy roads. While the priority was to improve the safety and convenience of paths for humans, they also provided a transport network for the birds, mammals and insects of the town. The planting of trees and bushes of different heights provide homes and hunting grounds for mice, foxes and rabbits and the canopy of the trees double up as nesting space for birds and highways for squirrels and insects. But in addition to the increased biodiversity, trees also help to reduce the temperature of the local area, combat air pollution and prevent excessive or damaging water run-off and thus tree planting has become part of the local authority's strategy to deal with the effects of climate change.

The local wildlife has had much to thank the planners for recently. Biodiversity has become an automatic consideration of planners who are keen to avoid biodiversity loss where possible. For instance, planners have introduced a question on their planning application form which asks if the development will damage the environment in any way. This question has already highlighted some potential loss of biodiversity which has now been prevented as well identifying ways in which new habitats could be created. While the question doesn't prompt automatic rejection, it does highlight potential issues which lead the local authority and the developer negotiating a solution. An example of this was when an environmental assessment (prompted by the new question) discovered the existence of great crested newts on a proposed development site. The development was only allowed after appropriate mitigation measures were implemented, along with habitat enhancement measures.

When the local newspaper reported this story, the Head of the Planning Department said that their job has been made much easier now that the Local Record Centre is up and running. The Centre is based in the neighbouring authority but collects important statistics and information about the local biodiversity. It is funded by a number of voluntary organisations and the 5 local authorities it serves. It ensures that planners have accurate maps of where important habitats are, which instantly flag up concern if a development is proposed in that area. The Centre also collects much more detailed information that is easily accessible by planning officers which speeds up the decision making process and helps them meet their targets.

As our visitor and her friend board the train and head out of Anytown they pass a newly developed large housing estate. The local authority ensured that the estate was developed with a sustainable urban drainage system (SUDS). This system reduces the amount of water from entering the drainage system by channeling surface water from roads and roofs into swales, ponds and lakes. This system has three main advantages. Firstly pressure on the near capacity sewer system is reduced – lessening the chance of floods. Secondly by reducing water run off, the need to artificially water gardens is reduced thus reducing demand on scarce water supplies and thirdly each element of the SUDS system creates the potential for wetland habitats. Sensitive planting (such as reed beds) have not only improved the quality of water but also encouraged new birds, animals and fish to the area.

Our visitor completes her visit to Anytown in the knowledge that with a little bit of imagination, a lot of nature can be encouraged and supported even in the most urban of settings.

This vision is illustrative rather than prescriptive. There are many more valuable methods, technologies and policy measures than we have space to discuss. Inclusion of an approach or policy measure here does not imply official LGA endorsement, or rejection of alternatives.

5. CASE STUDIES – what are local authorities already doing?

Coastal excitement, East Devon District Council

Over 270 local children were given the opportunity to explore the Undercliffs National Nature Reserve by boat this summer. In a partnership with English Nature, East Devon District Council's Education Ranger arranged for the children to be picked up in a boat, sail around the coast line (looking at crabs and jellyfish in the water) to be dropped off at a hard to reach cove. The children then used the beach as an outdoor classroom to learn about the local wildlife and some of the history related to the area. They even had a surprise visitor from the past, dressed as in Victorian costume to tell the tale of a great landslide in 1839.

South Norwood Lake, Croydon Council

Toxic algae was threatening to prompt a fall in the number of fish in South Norwood Lake by reducing oxygen in the water to dangerous levels. Instead of using a chemical solution to the problem, which could have harmed other forms of biodiversity local authority officers found environmentally friendly ways to avert the problem. By introducing microbes to compete for the nutrients which the algae feed off and placing barley straw bales in the lake to act as a natural algaecide the staff have ensured that the fish will survive and the lake can continue to be used as a major recreation resource for the local residents.

City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council

Bradford Council have begun restoring the footbridges in Mill Ghyll which link the town to nearby moorland. The bridges and other improvements (such as new seating, resurfacing paths and more shrubs and plants) will hopefully have three impacts;

- School children will be encouraged to use the area as an outdoor classroom.
- People will be to get greater recreational value and enjoy the wooded area more.
- Local wildlife will benefit from bird and bug boxes which will encourage the use of the area as a wildlife corridor.

Kent County Council

Kent has initiated a programme of works benefiting biodiversity in council owned Country Parks. Examples of work include a major chalk grassland restoration project that has enabled the spread of ground pine, a rare chalk grassland species, scrub clearance from chalk grassland at Trosley and Preston Hill and removal of invasive rhododendron at Shorne Wood. Surveys have been carried out on a variety of sites looking at the presence of fungi, flowering plants and bats and will help inform habitat management decisions.

Kent has also included a specific target within their community strategy to implement Kent's Biodiversity Action Plan to enhance and increase wildlife habitats and to encourage people to be actively aware of how they can preserve the environment. This means that the plan (produced by a wide network of partners) is now integrated in to the strategic planning of the County at the highest level.

Golborne Park, Wigan Metropolitan Council

Wigan Council has led a partnership of organisations to transform Golborne Park into safe, enjoyable and useful asset for the community. By forming an effective network of partners, and tackling the park and environment issues in a joined up way they will ensure that the park provides learning opportunities for children, safe habitats for wildlife, and clean and green spaces for the whole community to enjoy.

Actions that Wigan Borough Council have taken and are planning include;

- install and develop an educational pond to encourage wildlife and pond dipping
- fast removal of litter and fly tipping
- the introduction of organic solutions to natural pests in partnership with English Nature
- the resurfacing of paths to make the park more accessible
- improving the security of the park

6. Where can I find out more?

- Defra's **Guidance for local authorities on implementing the biodiversity duty** is available on: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/biodiversity/index.htm>
- The **Association of Local Government Ecologists** (ALGE) represents professional ecologists working in local government in the UK. In partnership with others, ALGE supports and develops the nature conservation work of local authorities www.alge.org.uk.
- The **Environment Advisory Service** provides a single entry point for local authority officers who work on environment to the various sources of good practice, advice and guidance which are available at a national level. It includes a section on biodiversity, with links to further information and local officer networks. <http://www.eas.local.gov.uk/Panel.asp?cat=1584>
- For more information on Defra's work on the conservation of wildlife, landscape and countryside recreation visit www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/biodiversity.
- **Natural England** works to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public well-being, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and in the future: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/default.htm>