



WATFORD
BOROUGH
COUNCIL

Biodiversity Duty Report

2026

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1. Introduction

This is the first Biodiversity Duty Report published by Watford Borough Council. It covers the reporting period **12 February 2024 to 1 January 2026**. This is consistent with when biodiversity net gain became mandatory for all new developments, unless exempt.

Despite being an urban borough, Watford is rich in biodiversity. Watford contains a number of Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites and is home to European Protected Species, such as pipistrelle bats. Other locally important but non-designated wildlife sites also make a significant contribution towards biodiversity in the area.

The sustained loss of green infrastructure and the breaking up of its networks can have a damaging effect on ecosystems in Watford. Inappropriate development could threaten the future of different species through habitat fragmentation and the loss of habitats. Given development and land use change pressures, it is important to ensure that Watford's biodiversity is protected and enhanced.

The following report provides a useful summary of all the actions and plans adopted by the council to help conserve and enhance biodiversity within the borough. Section 2 outlines how Watford plans to fulfil its biodiversity duty over the next five years. In addition, it includes information on the implementation and monitoring of biodiversity net gain.

2. Policies, objectives and actions

Activity	Actions under first consideration to continue	Updates (January 2026)
Policy and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watford Borough Council Delivery Plan 2024-2026 • Watford Local Plan (2021-2038) Policy NE9.8 • Environmental Strategy Targets • Climate and Ecological Emergency Declaration (2021) • Procurement Strategy • Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership Action Plan • A Tree and Woodland Management Strategy for Watford 2020-2030 • Watford Allotments Strategy 2020 - 2025 • Parks and Open Spaces Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) published November 2025 • Watford Green Spaces Strategy 2025-2035, going to Cabinet for approval in February 2026 • Litter Strategy for Watford 2021-2026 • The Biodiversity SPD has not yet progressed due to the adoption of national legislation on Biodiversity Net Gain. This will be reviewed as a part of the wider Local plan review.
Background and baseline for Watford	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity Baseline (HCC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Countryside Management Service (CMS) (part of HCC) Biodiversity Audits 2018 • Hertfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) published November 2025

<p>Management of our own estate and important sites</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rediscovering the River Colne – river restoration project including Lairage Land Local Nature Reserve • Cassiobury Wetland project • Biodiversity Audits for Parks and Open Spaces and development of action plans • Parks improvements projects - Meriden Park, Leavesden Green Recreation Ground • Whippendell Woods SSSI Management Plan • Tree Planting Programme 2022-2026 • Green Flag Management Plan reviews including action plans (17 sites including some Local Nature Reserves/areas e.g. Garston Park) • Maintenance regimes are in place across many green spaces for the benefit of biodiversity including increasing the area of no mow/conservation cutting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watford Green Spaces Strategy 2025-2035, going to Cabinet for approval in February 2026. <p>Rediscovering the River Colne</p> <p>10-year river restoration programme. Project delivery has been underway since 2021. Includes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Environmental improvements to river 2. Landscape and access improvements 3. Ongoing monitoring of condition of river 4. Community involvement and volunteering opportunities <p>Key biodiversity achievements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River channel/corridor improvements completed at Northern sites – Knutsford Playing Fields, Radlett Road Playing Fields, Timberlake Allotments, Waterfields Recreation Ground (1.1km in total). • Floodplain habitat features installed including berms, flow deflectors, bank regrading, backwater, and scrapes. • Tree works completed to enable more light to reach the river channel to allow marginal and aquatic vegetation to develop. • 1.1ha sown with UK native plant species • River channel/corridor improvements are being designed for Southern sites. • Constructed wetland enhancement scheme – feasibility assessment underway. • Invasive non-native species removal sessions with volunteers for Himalayan Balsam <p>Tree planting 2021/22 to 2024/25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard tree planting – 400 on streets, 100 in parks • Whip planting – 3000 in Whippendell Wood, 900 in other parks. • Community orchards – 5 parks • Tree giveaways – 28,000 trees over 4 years
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Activity	Actions under first consideration to continue	Updates (January 2026)
		<p>Green Flag Management Plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated annually including biodiversity improvements/actions.
Assessment of impact of current policies and activities on Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining current 18% tree canopy cover Increase in Wetland habitat. Improving Ecological status for the River Colne 17 Green Flag Award sites with Management Plans including action plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Watford Green Spaces Strategy 2025-2035, going to Cabinet for approval in February 2026 Local Plan Authority Monitoring Report 2024-2025 26% canopy cover¹ Council land managed for Biodiversity increased to 42%²
Projects and partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership HMWT Rediscovering the River Colne Water Quality Forum ParksHerts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The stated partnerships are all ongoing. HCCSP Biodiversity Action Plan published in May 2024 WBC has an SLA with HMWT to manage the Cassiobury Park Local Nature Reserve, they run sessions with Friends of Cassiobury Park and other volunteers. HMWT have also been involved with the Rediscovering the River Colne project, carrying out wildlife surveys of the river corridor. The River Colne Water Quality Forum meets quarterly with key stakeholders, and a report is produced annually.

¹ Page 6 - Environmental Strategy Annual Report 2024/25: <https://www.watford.gov.uk/sustainable-watford/downloads/file/51/annual-report-2024-25>

² Page 6 - Environmental Strategy Annual Report 2024/25: <https://www.watford.gov.uk/sustainable-watford/downloads/file/51/annual-report-2024-25>

<p>Communities and volunteers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends groups • Green Gym • Community Connections CIC Ltd • Watford on the Water River Colne Volunteer and Citizen Science programme 	<p>Active friends groups/Resident Associations are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends of Cassiobury Park • Friends of Oxhey Park • Friends of Harebreaks Wood • Courtlands Residents Association (Goodwood Recreation Ground) • Ridge Residents Association (Orchard Park) • Watford Fields Residents Association • Green Heart of Watford (St Mary’s Churchyard) • Oxhey Village Environment Group (OVEG) <p>Friends groups/Resident Associations activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular litter picking events • Practical conservation sessions • Reporting issues • Requesting improvements <p>Support and funding for voluntary and community groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watford Borough Council’s Neighbourhood Grant (up to £50,000) and Small Grants Fund (up to £1500) • Veolia’s Sustainability Fund (up to £1000) and Friends in Green Spaces (FIGS) Fund (up to £1500) • Funding to improve public places, purchase tools, bulbs/plants/trees or other supplies • Lending litter picking kits, and collecting rubbish afterwards (including separated recycling) • Annual Green Flag Award Celebration <p>Green Gym activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical conservation tasks to keep physically active
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Activity	Actions under first consideration to continue	Updates (January 2026)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planting wildflowers, bulbs, hedgerows, and trees • Meadow management • Scrub and path clearance • Insect hotel and deadwood hedge creation • Removal of invasive species <p>Community Connection Projects CIC activities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Litter and fly tipping clearances • Habitat improvements e.g. brushwood berms, aquatic/marginal vegetation • Water quality and flow e.g. remove blockages, measure water quality, report pollution • Invasive species control - especially Himalayan Balsam and Signal Crayfish • General maintenance • Collaborating with volunteers and the community / engaging with stakeholders <p>Rediscovering the River Colne community involvement and volunteering opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Citizen Science' monitoring through riverfly surveys/water chemistry samples/outfall safaris • Water Quality Forum with key stakeholders • Junior River Champion / Wildplay sessions • Volunteer sessions and regular engagement • Annual community festival event

Activity	Actions under first consideration to continue	Updates (January 2026)
<p>Education and awareness raising</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rediscovering the River Colne restoration programme • HMWT Volunteer Programmes • Veolia Outreach Programme and Community Orchard Scheme • Outdoor Learning in Cassiobury Park inc school visits, regular preschool explorers, guided walks, community engagement 	<p>St Mary’s Churchyard Improvements Collaborated with local schools to create signage and wildflower meadows.</p> <p>Veolia outreach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School bulb planting and seed bombing sessions • Support community litter picks and Keep Britain Tidy’s Great British Spring Clean • Host annual tree giveaway • Support Rediscovering the River Colne project at annual festival event • Monthly newsletter to schools. • Deliver schools assemblies or classroom talks with eco-friendly and sustainable topics • Host annual sustainable schools webinar • Deliver an orchard of five fruit trees or 10 strawberry plants with local schools and community groups, subject to successful application <p>Cassiobury Park outdoor learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided Early Years and Primary school visits covering national curriculum topics. Includes topics such as geography, science, history, and art. Also, provide sessions with fieldwork and fun nature exploration. • Weekly Explorers sessions (pre-school), offer families opportunities for outdoor exploration, observing seasonal changes and nature play. • Family events covering seasonal changes, nature, and history of Cassiobury Park.

Activity	Actions under first consideration to continue	Updates (January 2026)
Actions and reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AMR for Watford Local Plan 2021- 2038 • Environmental Strategy Delivery Plan (2023-2025) • Council Project and Programme Management Protocol • Green Flag Assessments Strategy and Management Plan reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2023/24 AMR was published in January 2025 • Reporting on submitted Biodiversity Gain Plans (section 3 of this report) • Green Flag management plan updates underway, will be submitted with award applications in January 2026 • Environmental Strategy Delivery Plan (2027-2029)
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development pressures on land • Uncertainty of land availability for offset • No dedicated ecologist in WBC • Lack of dedicated officer resource • Funding • Water pollution • Invasive species 	

3. Future actions

Table 2: Future actions to fulfil Watford Borough Council’s biodiversity duty over the next 5 years

Activity	Future actions
Policy and objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Green Spaces Strategy 2025-2035, going to Cabinet for approval in February 2026 • Watford Allotments Strategy 2020-2025 – An update will be required; however, this is likely to be after local government reform. Meanwhile, the maintenance and management strategy will continue to be followed. • Litter Strategy for Watford 2021-2026 – Update required, may need to be aligned with LGR • Watford Local Plan 2021-2038 review.
Background and baseline for Watford	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of recommendations within Countryside Management Service (CMS) Biodiversity Audits 2018. • Continue to test feasibility to delivering the recommendations on council managed land.
Management of our own estate and important sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the delivery of Rediscovering the River Colne programme. • Ongoing appropriate management and maintenance of Cassiobury Park Wetlands, Whippendell Wood SSSI and Local Nature Reserves • Continue tree planting in parks and open spaces • Identify further opportunities for and delivery of biodiversity enhancements
Assessment of impact of current policies and activities on Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to publish an annual Authority Monitoring Report of the Watford Local Plan 2021-2023. • Continue to publish an annual Environmental Strategy Report. • Continue recording habitat types and measuring habitat quality where possible, to demonstrate improvements through projects.

Table 2: Future actions to fulfil Watford Borough Council’s biodiversity duty over the next 5 years

Projects and partnerships	<p>Maintain and develop existing partnerships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue working with HMWT to manage Cassiobury Park Local Nature Reserve and engage with other projects as required.• Rediscovering the River Colne Water Quality Forum to continue while funding is available. River Colne to Good Ecological status.• ParksHerts and HCCSP meetings and activities to continue.• Continued joint working with neighbouring authorities• HCCSP Biodiversity Action Plan• Identify opportunities for and establish new partnerships e.g. ‘Green Heart of Watford’ at St Mary’s Churchyard
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Table 2: Future actions to fulfil Watford Borough Council’s biodiversity duty over the next 5 years

<p>Communities and volunteers</p>	<p>Continue supporting Friends of/Resident Associations to enable activities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular litter picking events • Practical conservation sessions • Reporting issues • Requesting improvements <p>Continue supporting Green Gyms to enable activities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical conservation tasks to keep physically active • Planting wildflowers, bulbs, hedgerows, and trees • Meadow management • Scrub and path clearance • Insect hotel and deadwood hedge creation • Removal of invasive species <p>Continue supporting Community Connection Projects CIC to enable activities including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Litter and fly tipping clearances • Habitat improvements e.g. brushwood berms, aquatic/marginal vegetation • Water quality and flow e.g. remove blockages, measure water quality, report pollution • Invasive species control - especially Himalayan Balsam and Signal Crayfish • General maintenance • Collaborating with volunteers and the community / engaging with stakeholders
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Table 2: Future actions to fulfil Watford Borough Council’s biodiversity duty over the next 5 years

	<p>Rediscovering the River Colne community involvement and volunteering opportunities to continue while funding is available, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Citizen Science’ monitoring through riverfly surveys/water chemistry samples/outfall safaris • Water Quality Forum with key stakeholders • Junior River Champion / Wildplay sessions • Volunteer sessions and regular engagement • Annual community festival event
<p>Education and awareness raising</p>	<p>Veolia outreach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School bulb planting and seed bombing sessions • Support community litter picks and Keep Britain Tidy’s Great British Spring Clean • Host annual tree giveaway • Support Rediscovering the River Colne project at annual festival event • Monthly newsletter to schools. • Deliver schools assemblies or classroom talks with eco-friendly and sustainable topics • Host annual sustainable schools webinar • Deliver an orchard of five fruit trees or 10 strawberry plants with local schools and community groups, subject to successful application <p>Cassiobury Park outdoor learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided Early Years and Primary school visits covering national curriculum topics. Includes topics such as geography, science, history, and art. Also, provide sessions with fieldwork and fun nature exploration. • Weekly Explorers sessions (pre-school), offer families opportunities for outdoor exploration, observing seasonal changes and nature play. • Family events covering seasonal changes, nature, and history of Cassiobury Park.

Table 2: Future actions to fulfil Watford Borough Council’s biodiversity duty over the next 5 years

Actions and reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annual Authority Monitoring Report for Watford Local Plan 2021- 2038 (2024/25 report to be published February 2026)• Environmental Strategy Annual Reporting• Updated Green Flag management plans will be submitted with award applications in January 2026• Project reporting for active projects and programmes e.g. Rediscovering the River Colne• Environmental Strategy Delivery Plan and annual reports (2025-2027)• Environmental Strategy Delivery Plan and annual reports (2027-2029)
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4. Biodiversity Net Gain

A 10% Biodiversity Net Gain became a legal requirement for all planning applications for major developments from 12 February 2024, and for minor developments on 2 April 2024, subject to exemptions. In addition, Policy NE3.9 of the Watford Local Plan (adopted October 2022) requires all major applications to achieve a BNG of at least 10%.

4.1 Actions carried out by WBC to meet Biodiversity Net Gain obligations

Table 3: Actions carried out to implement mandatory biodiversity net gain

Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development Management, Technical Support and Planning Policy officers have attended training on BNG and the LNRS. Further training sessions are strongly encouraged to promote continuous professional development.
Working together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning officers attend monthly meetings with ecology and planning colleagues from neighbouring LPAs. Planning officers attend regular knowledge sharing sessions with the Planning Advisory Service. BNG has been made a standing agenda item within the bi-weekly case discussion group with the Development Management, planning policy and enforcement teams.
Specialist advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ecology consultants have been procured to support development management officers on complex planning applications.
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A monitoring software, Exacom, has been procured to ensure the Biodiversity Gain Plans are monitored accurately. The planning policy officer is consulted on all applicable applications to ensure the correct information has been submitted and, if an exemption is declared, there is sufficient evidence supporting it.
Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The validation checklist has been updated to include the requirement for a baseline Biodiversity Metric. The software used for logging planning applications (Uniform) has been adapted to include an exemption field, to record the exemption type and evidence submitted.

Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A webpage has been produced on the Watford Council website containing guidance for residents, applicants, and agents on BNG requirements.
Decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An informative is added to applicable planning application decision notices to ensure that applicants are aware of the deemed condition that needs to be discharged pre-commencement. • A planning policy officer is consulted on Biodiversity Gain Plan applications to ensure the next stage of the monitoring process is triggered.

4.2 Details of biodiversity gains resulting from biodiversity gain plans approved

Between 12 February 2024 and 1 January 2026, 12 planning applications were granted with the deemed biodiversity net gain condition. Of the 12 applications granted, three have subsequently submitted and approved Biodiversity Gain Plans.

Table 4: Biodiversity gain plan information

Total number of planning permissions granted that require biodiversity net gain in the reporting period	12
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period	3
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through on-site units only	0
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through off-site units only	0
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through statutory credits only	0
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of on-site and off-site units	3
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of on-site units and statutory credits	0
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of off-site units and statutory credits	0
Total number of biodiversity gain plans approved in the reporting period securing BNG through a combination of on-site, off-site units and statutory credits	0

Table 5: Information on the exemptions from mandatory biodiversity net gain

Exemption	Number of applicable applications validated
Temporary exemption for non-major development (until April 2024)	25
De minimis	182
Householder development	632
Granted by a development order under section 59	543
Self-build and custom build development	11
Retrospective applications	41
Section 73 (where original applications granted before 12 February 2024)	20
Urgent Crown development	0
Biodiversity gain site	0
High speed railway transport network	0
Total	1454

4.3 Future actions for implementing and monitoring Biodiversity Net Gain

All actions in section 4.1 will continue to be carried out and monitored. The planning policy team will continue to work with internal colleagues to ensure the Biodiversity Net Gain condition is being applied correctly and monitored. The council will continue to work with colleagues from across the county on using the Local Nature Recovery Strategy appropriately. Watford Borough Council is committed to further enhancing biodiversity across the borough and will ensure that new documents and updates to policies and strategies consider the need to improve biodiversity.