



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

A Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Wiltshire

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1. Project Background

The Wiltshire Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy 2022-2030 is Wiltshire's natural environment plan.

'Green infrastructure can embrace a range of spaces and assets that provide environmental and wider benefits. It can, for example, include parks, playing fields, other areas of open space, woodland, allotments, private gardens, sustainable drainage features, green roofs and walls, street trees and 'blue infrastructure' such as streams, ponds, canals and other water bodies.

Green infrastructure is a natural capital asset that provides multiple benefits, at a range of scales. For communities, these benefits can include enhanced wellbeing, outdoor recreation and access, enhanced biodiversity and landscapes, food and energy production, urban cooling, and the management of flood risk. These benefits are also known as ecosystem services.'

(Planning Practice Guidance on the Natural Environment)

In the context of the global climate emergency, biodiversity loss and the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, investment in the provision of high quality, biodiverse and accessible green and blue infrastructure has never been more vital.

Located in South West England, Wiltshire is a large unitary council (covering c.3,255km²) with a largely rural population of around 498,000. The principal settlements are Trowbridge, Salisbury and Chippenham with around 14 smaller market towns (e.g. Devizes, Amesbury and Warminster) and numerous historic villages.

Wiltshire is a special place renowned for its outstanding downland landscapes, rivers and canal network, extensive wildlife habitats and iconic heritage sites. This rich and varied environment underpins Wiltshire's natural capital; it makes Wiltshire an attractive place to live, work and visit, enhances quality of life and well-being, and underpins the economy.

Similar to other rural areas in England, Wiltshire's natural environment is facing substantial pressures driven by a changing climate, biodiversity loss, population growth and development.

In response to these challenges, Wiltshire Council commissioned CBA www.cbastudios.com to develop the first Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Wiltshire, working closely in collaboration with the Council's officers and Members/Portfolio holders.

The brief was to set out a long-term vision, strategic goals and principles for delivering green and blue infrastructure benefits across Wiltshire by a range of partners and stakeholders, working together at a variety of scales.

The strategy was required to provide a framework for developing delivery strategies and detailed implementation plans that reflect national priorities and local needs, including linking nature recovery initiatives with achieving healthy, resilient and safe communities.

The strategy sets out the overarching framework for Wiltshire supported by local Settlement Frameworks that identify needs, opportunities and guiding principles for provision of green and blue infrastructure in and around Wiltshire's principal settlements and market towns.

CBA was commissioned in January 2020, and the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy 2022-2030 was formally adopted by Wiltshire Council in February 2022 following public consultation.

2. Outcomes for People and Communities

Contributing to positive outcomes for people and communities through investment in Wiltshire's green and blue infrastructure network is a key goal of the strategy. Goal 3 (Contributing to health & well-

being) states 'By 2030, we will have increased the health and well-being benefits of access to nature, and improved the sustainable use and health of our natural resources' (see criteria 4 for details).

'Healthy Living' and 'Economic Recovery' are key delivery themes of the strategy, which promotes the economic and social well-being benefits of strengthening green and blue infrastructure networks, which can help Wiltshire's local businesses build a strong, competitive and prosperous economy. The Settlement Frameworks identify needs and opportunities for provision of safe, attractive and accessible green spaces to address health inequalities and to support the health and well-being of:

- People with mobility, sensory and intellectual impairments
- Children/young people, elderly people and families
- People experiencing high levels of multiple deprivation
- Women and other vulnerable groups experiencing barriers to safe use of public open space

The Settlement Frameworks are intended to support delivery of local projects identified in neighbourhood plans or community environmental plans developed using the Wiltshire Community Environmental Toolkit. Working in partnership with Natural England, Wiltshire Council created the Toolkit for supporting and inspiring local people and communities to take the lead in helping to reverse biodiversity loss and address climate change in their community. It forms part of a suite of documents that Wiltshire Council is producing to implement the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy and deliver the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

Designed for use by community groups, local landowners, Parish and Town Councils, schools and youth groups, the Toolkit provides guidance for how local communities can plan for developing greater biodiversity and nature-based carbon sequestration in the future. While planting trees has been a popular reaction and is to be welcomed, Wiltshire Council were concerned there was a risk that these good intentions could, without adequate knowledge and supporting guidance, inadvertently harm other valuable wildlife habitats. The Toolkit is a step by step guide that provides guidance for communities on how to survey and identify key habitat types and explains what some of the wider benefits are – e.g. carbon storage, flood mitigation and water quality improvements. It also provides links to further guidance, useful organisations and potential funding opportunities.

The Toolkit celebrates and shares good practice examples of community-led projects being delivered by organisations across Wiltshire (such as the Salisbury River Park), which can provide inspiration for other projects. It has been widely shared with community groups plus town and parish councils, alongside training and expert support provided by the council's own ecologists and from partner organisations. Projects are being mapped and will form part of the emerging Wiltshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy to reinforce and enhance valuable green and blue corridors and spaces. The Community Environmental Toolkit was displayed at the UN COP26 Climate Change Conference in 2021.

3. Planning Contribution

Planners played a leading role in facilitating a strong collaborative and joined up approach to improving Wiltshire's natural environment for the benefit of people and nature through the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy.

Dominic Watkins MRTPI (CBA Director/Environmental Planner) led the consultant team, supported by CBA's Environmental Planning Team.

The client team was led by Lynn Trigwell (Head of Natural & Historic Environment) from Wiltshire Council's Economic Development & Planning department, with Georgina Clampitt-Dix MRTPI (Head of Spatial Planning) providing oversight.

Council planning officers managed community consultation and stakeholder engagement led by Victoria Burvill MRTPI (Senior Climate Officer/Planning Officer). Others instrumental in shaping the strategy included the council's landscape planners, ecologists and climate change/ sustainability officers.

As a cross-cutting approach, the strategy was shaped through early and on-going engagement with a wide range of internal stakeholders and external partners from across the following sectors:

- Wiltshire Council
- Wiltshire Community Area Boards
- Neighbouring Authorities
- Natural Environment Partners
- Water/Blue Infrastructure Partners
- Historic Environment Partners
- Health & Well-being Partners
- Rural Economy & Business Partners
- Transport Partners

Engagement started with a workshop in February 2020 attended by some 50 representatives of 29 organisations. A webinar attended by many of the same stakeholders was held in May 2021 to identify priorities for the emerging strategy to focus on.

A joint public consultation on the draft Wiltshire Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy (in conjunction with the draft Wiltshire Climate Strategy) ran for 6 weeks from 1st September to 17th October 2021. A total of 213 responses were received from both private individuals and stakeholder organisations, the majority of which have been overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the green infrastructure approach. The feedback was invaluable in helping shape the final strategy adopted by the Council on 15 February 2022.

Founded on this strong collaborative and joined up approach, the strategy is helping the council deliver many of the goals in the Government's 25-Year Environment Plan. In line with the 2021 National Planning Policy Framework, the strategy also set out to meet many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals through the effective protection and enhancement of the natural environment as an integral part of the planning and place-making process (see criteria 4).

Together with the forthcoming Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Wiltshire, the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy has a significant role to play in delivering nature-based solutions for mitigating and adapting to climate change impacts to support the Council's new Climate Strategy.

In addition to providing a framework for co-ordination of conservation and water management at a landscape/catchment-scale in Wiltshire, the strategy will also support delivery of enhanced green and blue infrastructure provision at a settlement-scale for the benefit of local communities.

The Settlement Frameworks will inform the new Local Plan by identifying needs, opportunities and guiding principles for provision of green and blue infrastructure. These will also support delivery of local projects in neighbourhood/community environmental plans identified using the Wiltshire Community Environmental Toolkit (see criteria 1).

4. Outcomes for climate action

As a result of global warming, Wiltshire is set to experience warmer, wetter winters and hotter, drier summers. Extreme weather events will become more frequent. Wiltshire Council has a key responsibility for addressing climate change through mitigation and adaptation measures, both within its services and as part of its community leadership role.

In response to the global climate emergency, Wiltshire Council committed to make Wiltshire carbon neutral by 2030 and the Council's Climate Emergency Task Group has produced a Climate Strategy setting out the next five years of action on climate change.

Contributing to positive outcomes for climate action through investment in Wiltshire's green and blue infrastructure network is a key goal of the strategy. Goal 1 (Mitigation, adaptation and resilience to climate change) states:

'By 2030, we will have increased our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change through adoption of nature-based solutions. Working in partnership, we will do this by:

- Contributing to national targets and Wiltshire Council Climate Strategy objectives for cutting greenhouse gas emissions (including from urban and rural land use change, opportunities for active travel, and the agriculture and waste sectors)
- Considering the best nature-based pathways to help support 'Net Zero' for the county
- Supporting the delivery of climate change adaptation strategies and management plans for Wiltshire to improve its resilience to impacts of climate change associated with a 2°C temperature rise
- Reducing risks of harm from natural hazards through adoption of natural flood and water management approaches alongside traditional grey infrastructure at the local and catchment level
- Contributing to national targets for reducing over-abstraction of water, and meeting water quality objectives for biodiversity and drinking water
- Promoting nature-based carbon removal from the atmosphere through better soil management, the protection of existing natural carbon sinks and the promotion of tree and woodland establishment'

A new Wiltshire Climate & Environment Forum established and led by Wiltshire Council will co-ordinate partnership working and joined-up delivery of the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy alongside the Climate Strategy.

5. Outcomes for sustainable development

Contributing to positive outcomes for sustainable development by delivering benefits from investment in Wiltshire's green and blue infrastructure network is a fundamental overarching aim of the strategy. The strategy's three main goals outlined below meet UN Sustainable Development Goals 13 (combat climate change), 15 (halt biodiversity loss) and 3 (healthy lives & well-being):

'Goal 1 – Mitigation, adaptation and resilience to climate change

By 2030, we will have increased our ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change through adoption of nature-based solutions' (see criteria 3 for details).

'Goal 2 – Halting loss of & improving biodiversity

By 2030, we will have gained a more biodiverse and resilient ecological network in Wiltshire. Working in partnership, we will do this by:

- Supporting the development of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy to help build resilience to climate change and provide opportunities for species and ecosystem recovery.
- Helping to restore our terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term.

- Creating or restoring wildlife-rich habitat outside the protected site network, focusing on priority habitats as part of a wider set of land management changes providing extensive benefits.
- Taking action to recover threatened, iconic or economically important species of animals, plants and fungi, and where possible to prevent human induced extinction or loss of known threatened species.
- Increasing carbon storage capacity of woodlands in line with the Government's aspiration of 12% woodland cover by 2060 in England involving planting 180,000 hectares by end of 2042.

'Goal 3 – Contributing to health & well-being

By 2030, we will have increased the health and well-being benefits of access to nature, and improved the sustainable use and health of our natural resources. Working in partnership, we will do this by:

- Safeguarding and enhancing the outstanding natural beauty and character of our landscapes to enhance a sense of place and support the local economy.
- Help make sure that there are high quality, accessible green spaces close to where people live and work, particularly to help adapt to climate change in urban areas.
- Encouraging more people to be active outdoors, participate in active travel opportunities and get involved with community food growing by encouraging better access to our GBI networks
- Empowering communities to get more involved in the management and protection of local GBI, taking ownership of local assets and managing them for the benefit of the whole community where necessary.
- Improving our approach to sustainable soil, food and forestry management.
- Enhancing biosecurity measures to protect our wildlife and livestock, boost the resilience of plants and trees to pests and diseases and tackle invasive non-native species.
- Promoting nature-based solutions to improve air quality for people in locations that fail to meet national standards.'

The above strategy goals also contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goals 6 (clean water); 7 (clean energy); 8 (sustainable economic growth); 9 (resilient infrastructure); 11 (sustainable cities & communities); and 12 (sustainable water, energy and food).

6. Community Engagement

Developed through engagement with town and parish councils, and other local community stakeholders, the needs and opportunities for provision of green and blue infrastructure set out in the Settlement Frameworks were shaped by feedback from a questionnaire-based householder survey undertaken during Spring 2020.

The Settlement Frameworks are intended to support delivery of local green and blue infrastructure projects in neighbourhood plans or community environmental plans identified using the Wiltshire Community Environmental Toolkit guidance (see criteria 1).

A joint public consultation on the draft Wiltshire Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy (in conjunction with the draft Wiltshire Climate Strategy) ran for 6 weeks from 1st September to 17th October 2021. This included consultation events at local libraries and an online survey. A total of 213 responses were received from both private individuals and stakeholder organisations, the majority of which have been

overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the green infrastructure approach. The feedback was invaluable in helping shape the final strategy adopted by the Council on 15 February 2022.

The strategy includes a commitment by Wiltshire Council to empower communities to take ownership and responsibility for managing and maintaining their local green and blue infrastructure assets. Wiltshire Council's Community Asset Transfer Policy enables the transfer the management and/or ownership of council owned assets (such as community parks, play areas, allotments, amenity land and woodlands) to community groups or town/parish councils for the benefit and enjoyment of the whole community. Through raising awareness of this policy and highlighting the opportunities to community groups, Wiltshire's communities can gain greater control of their local green and blue infrastructure assets, and plan for their improvement using the Wiltshire Community Environmental Toolkit.

As highlighted by the strategy, the Wiltshire Community Land Trust fosters bottom-up development, strengthening communities by supporting local people to contribute to meeting their own needs and aspirations. It provides information, advice and support for community groups wishing to set up a Community Land Trust – a legally incorporated, volunteer led organisation that takes on the ownership and management of local assets for the benefit of a specific community, such as land for recreation and growing food, wildlife reserves and a range of community facilities and local services.

7. Leading Practice

The Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy establishes a bold new direction for the future management and use of Wiltshire's natural environment, placing green and blue infrastructure thinking at the heart of planning for sustainable development by partners working at all scales. This is reflected in the desired outcomes of the strategy captured in the vision for Wiltshire's Green & Blue Infrastructure, which states:

'Wiltshire's multi-functional network of high quality, biodiverse and accessible green and blue infrastructure is widely valued by our communities, businesses and visitors. Managed sustainably through strong leadership and partnerships, the green and blue infrastructure network provides a range of well-being benefits for people, places and nature across Wiltshire. As a result of working with natural processes to support delivery of multi-functional ecosystem services, Wiltshire is better able to adapt to a changing climate and biodiversity loss has been reversed. Networks of green and blue spaces and corridors in the countryside and our towns support access to nature and healthy lifestyles, and provide high quality landscapes and beautiful places for people to live, work and visit.'

The Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy champions use of nature-based solutions for making Wiltshire's communities, businesses and wildlife more resilient to climate change, achieving net gain in biodiversity to support sustainable growth and nature recovery, and provides opportunities for improving access to green spaces for all.

The Settlement Frameworks and Community Environmental Toolkit are creative and innovative responses to the brief, providing key planning tools for helping deliver positive outcomes for people and nature at the local scale.

Overall, the strategy is considered to have wider application potential as a good practice exemplar for other rural councils seeking to adopt a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing green and blue infrastructure through partnership working at a landscape/catchment-scale and settlement scale.

Please note that this case study has been taken from their entry form and so RTPi does not take responsibility for accuracy of contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake further research into the project which is likely to have developed since the time that this entry was written.