

Kent’s Plan Bee – An Introduction to the County Council’s Pollinator Action Plan

Kent’s Plan Bee is a pollinator action plan developed after a unanimous vote of the county council. It is designed to take a lead in mobilising the people, the businesses, the schools, the gardeners, the farmers, the old and the young - everybody who lives here - to act to improve the habitat and the food sources of these insects and to reverse their rapid decline. Pollinators are vital to our food, economy and environment. This action plan sets out what Kent County Council is doing. It began, in a small way, after a third of all Britain’s honey bees died because of bad weather through the autumn, winter and spring of 2012-13.

What is its purpose?

The purposes of Kent’s Plan Bee are to:

- make the county council a community leader in action for pollinators, showing the way in its own operations and property and by supporting others
- ensure that pollinators’ needs are always considered throughout Kent County Council’s work and services
- put the conservation of pollinators and their habitats at the heart of the council’s land management and planning
- make Kent County Council a significant contributor to the recovery of pollinator populations which will support biodiversity and the need of the county’s agriculture.

What is the plan doing?

1. It is consolidating positive land management in favour of pollinators within Kent County Council’s estate, which includes roadside verges and parks and any other land the council owns, manages or can influence.
2. It is establishing that the county council will work with local planning authorities to seek to use the planning system to benefit pollinator populations and their habitats and food sources.
3. It is giving a lead to the people of Kent generally, to take their own action, however big or small, in their communities, workplaces, schools and homes.
4. It is working continually to make people aware of the importance of safeguarding pollinators in their communities and how they can do it.

What’s the problem?

Pollinators are insects which are essential to our environment, and even to our lives and they are declining fast. They are so-called because they carry the reproductive dust, pollen, from flower to flower to grow the new generations of plants. Without them a significant number of plants, from trees to strawberries, could not reproduce. The environmental group Buglife says every third mouthful of our food depends on insect pollinators.

These creatures have been in serious decline for many years and a loud and clear message is coming from scientists, wildlife organisations and the government that they need help and quickly otherwise all of us, plants, pollinators and people, face serious problems.

They are central to Kent's fruit farms – 40% of the county's agriculture. They serve crops like oil seed rape, clovers and other nitrogen fixing plants, important for livestock grazing and wild flowers. They add to the diversity of plant species, habitats and wildlife in Kent as well as its natural beauty - which also has an economic value. This provides food and makes Kent a better place to live, to enjoy and to visit. Losing our pollinators would be a major ecological and economic disaster.

What are pollinators?

The best loved of them are bees, among which are honey bees, the only pollinators kept by humans. Wild pollinators include bumblebees and solitary bees but also parasitic wasps, hoverflies, butterflies, moths, mosquitos, some beetles and even ants in small way. Many plants have evolved to offer nectar to attract insects to use them as part of their reproductive cycle. While they are at the flower, pollen inside it sticks to their bodies and transfers to the reproductive organs of the next one they visit.

Bees and wasps visit flowers to collect pollen and nectar to feed themselves and their young. Honey bees are the main managed pollinators of crops. Hives may be moved from crop to crop and harvested for honey and other products. Crops which benefit include orchards and soft fruits, (rose family), oilseed rape and other seed brassicas (cabbage family), peas and beans (legumes).

Bumblebees and solitary bees are essential to wild plant populations and to commercial crops in orchards, soft fruits and tomatoes.

Wasps often feed on nectar while they wait to ambush insect prey, many of which are crop pests.

Butterflies and moths feed on nectar. They are pollinators of many wild flowers though they are less significant among British food crops.

Hoverflies are abundant on flowers for much of the year and adults feed on nectar and pollen. They're particularly important to carrots and apples. Their larvae's diet includes other insects, so some predatory hoverflies are used as biological control agents.

Mosquitos do not all bite. Females suck blood to develop eggs while males feed on nectar and so pollinate plants.

What's being done?

Kent's Plan Bee is part of a much wider movement. There are action plans around the country, which have helped inform Kent's Plan Bee. The government brought out the National Pollinator Strategy for England in 2014 which is a ten-year plan to rescue these insects and to help them to thrive. Other organisations, environmental groups such as Buglife and Friends of the Earth, and business have developed plans too.

What can local government do?

The National Pollinator Strategy lays great emphasis on local action and it does look to local authorities to take a leading role. Kent County Council (KCC) unanimously agreed in May 2018 to produce its own Pollinator Action Plan. Local authorities, from parish to county are seen as well

placed to make a significant contribution. They can do it directly through land management and development control and by giving leadership in local communities and, of course among their thousands of council staff. Kent County Council is responsible for verges on 5,000 miles of road, it has numerous other sites, parks and buildings where it can and does take a lead in action.

What difference can an action plan make?

The environmental groups Buglife and Friends of the Earth say that a pollinator action plan like Kent's Plan Bee can:

- ensure pollinators' needs are taken into account across a local authority's work;
- raise the awareness of pollinators' needs across all of a local authority's staff, contracts and networks;
- do the same in local communities through its staff and elected members who represent those communities;
- help to identify previously unrecognised ways to help pollinators;
- ensure the wellbeing of pollinators is a principal consideration in land management;
- help pollinator populations to recover to the benefit of farming and food production;
- identify chances to set up local initiatives within communities.

What do pollinators need?

Like all animals, pollinators need food which for them is nectar and pollen foraged from a variety of flowering plants.

Shelter

They also need to be able to shelter, nest and overwinter in diverse habitats such as hedgerows, scrub and tall grass, burrows and holes in tree trunks. Many have different needs again in their larval (young) stages. Honey bees have their shelter (hives) provided but they still have problems in common with other pollinators.

Forage

Their foraging grounds have been steadily eroded. All pollinators need flowering, semi-natural habitats like wildflower meadows, hedgerows and woodland edges. They need agricultural landscapes which have unimproved grassland, hay meadows, clover-rich grassland, orchards and arable crops. In Kent many of these are declining and are in short supply. Large fields of wind pollinated crops like barley do not support insect pollinators.

Beyond the countryside

It's not only the countryside where pollinators' needs can be better met. They can find food and shelter in gardens, parks, roadside verges and any other open area. It's quite easy to provide for pollinators by making sure they have the right plants. They include common knapweed in wildflower meadows, red clover in pasture, hawthorn and bramble in hedgerows and woodland, and cosmos in bedding areas.

What are the threats?

The main threat to pollinators are: the intensive use of farmland which often destroys or fragments their habitats; disease; pesticides; invasive species like Asian hornets; and climate change. The threats are complex, involving interactions between different pollinators, and the environmental pressures, pests and disease that affect them.

The loss of pollinators is a direct threat to our ability to feed ourselves as numbers on Earth grow towards nine billion by 2050. Without bees, hoverflies and other insects visiting flowers there would be no strawberries, apples, avocados, chocolate, cherries, olives, blueberries, carrots, grapes, pumpkins, pears, cotton, plums or peanuts. And that's just the first course. There would also be few flowers in our gardens or countryside.

Decline

Half our 27 bumblebee species are in decline; three of them are already extinct. Across Europe 38% of bee and hoverfly species are declining along with two-thirds of our moths and nearly three-quarters of our butterflies. There are three main reasons for this which have already been touched upon and which are habitat loss, pesticides, and climate change.

Habitat loss

The most significant cause of pollinator decline, and the one which Kent's Plan Bee can most immediately address, is the loss and degradation of habitats. The loss of wildflower-rich grasslands is one of the most important issues, with over three million hectares lost in England since the 1930s, through modern farming and urban or industrial development. Many wildflower-rich habitats are now small areas separated by hostile (to pollinators) land uses, making it difficult for insects to move around our landscapes.

Pesticides

Increased use of pesticides has had a major impact on pollinators and the plants on which they depend. The majority of neonicotinoid pesticides, which are scientifically proven to be much more toxic to pollinators, have been banned in the EU. Restrictions on the use of pesticides in consideration of these impacts is a government level matter, albeit one that the county council may choose to engage in through consultation.

Climate Change

By disrupting seasonal patterns and flowering periods of plants, climate change can take away pollinators' food, especially if they depend on one, or very few, species of plant. Extreme weather bringing floods or droughts is a threat as are any changes in microclimates in which some insects thrive. Again, this is a subject of direct concern to Kent's Plan Bee and the Kent Environment Strategy must take account of pollinators.

What's being done in Kent now?

Kent is an important county for bees. Six of the seven rarest species of bumblebee live here. Most, like the shrill carder bee, are now found only in coastal areas.

There is already a lot of good work in the county.

Kent's Plan Bee

Kent County Council, through **Kent's Plan Bee**, has run two school competitions and held an introductory summit and two further summits for parks and owners of linear features such as railways, canals and rivers. The new strategy revisits those and will follow on with others.

Making a Buzz for the Coast

A project to safeguard rare bees has been run by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, of which Kent County Council is a partner. **Making a Buzz for the Coast** has created and restored habitats and linked isolated populations by creating flower-rich 'stepping stones' along 135 miles of the coast. It's doing surveys of habitat and populations to build a better knowledge of the bees from Dartford to

Deal. Apart from KCC, partners include the Kent Wildlife Trust, Natural England, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Swale Borough Council, Thanet District Council and Thames Water.

Roadside Nature Reserves

Within **Buzz** Kent Wildlife Trust is setting up more **Roadside Nature Reserves**. These are ‘bee roads’ which aim to connect the rare bumblebee populations. The **Kent and Medway Road Verge Project** has been going since 1994, protecting threatened wildlife and habitats in roadside verges. It’s run by a team of voluntary road verge wardens and is a partnership between KCC and Kent Wildlife Trust.

Short-Haired Bumblebee Reintroduction

These bees went extinct in 2000 having been formerly widespread across England. They depended on the species-rich grassland which since the 1960s had become patchy and isolated. A partnership of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Natural England, Hymettus and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was set up in 2009 to bring them back to Dungeness and Romney Marsh in Kent, the place where they were last seen. The successful project brought in short-haired bumblebees from Sweden and is working with farmers, landowners and conservation groups to create flower-rich habitats to support the new bees.

Landscape scale projects

Some projects bring benefits to bees because they are working in a wider environmental context – two Heritage Lottery Fund projects working in the distinctive Kent landscapes of chalk grassland and marshland respectively are examples of this. The **Old Chalk New Downs** project looks to restore and connect remaining fragments of precious chalk downland for the benefit of both species and people. The **Fifth Continent Landscape Partnership Scheme** is bringing several projects to Romney Marsh, on the themes of restore, rediscover and reclaim.

Kent Environment Strategy

Kent’s Plan Bee has an important place in Kent’s Environment Strategy which is designed to protect our natural and historic environments while supporting economic growth within them. There is much emphasis on bees, but the importance of the others, the hoverflies, beetles and butterflies, is not forgotten – they are equally essential to success.

The county council’s particular strength is in its connections and Kent’s Plan Bee uses those to bring people together from all directions, who may previously not have known of each other’s work or of opportunities to combine their efforts.

Working with facts

It’s important to measure how things have changed and the pollinator strategy will use research already in place to look at the numbers behind the stories. The nationwide **Pollinator Monitoring and Research Partnership** is using improved analysis of long-term records and new systematic surveys to find out how insect pollinator populations are changing. This gives us much needed data on pollinators, especially wild bees and hoverflies, and how they support farming and other wildlife. <https://bit.ly/2eN7LKZ>

Also, at national level, the UK biodiversity indicator D1C7 reports on the status of pollinating insects and there are volunteer groups such as **The British Wasps, Bees and Ants Recording Society**. <http://www.bwars.com/> which works under the UK Biological Records Centre <http://www.brc.ac.uk/>

All the Kent projects mentioned above also carry out important data collection and analysis.

KENT'S PLAN BEE – the pollinator action plan

Kent's Plan Bee is an action plan. It sets out things which will actually be done to better the lot of pollinators. It is intended to mobilise the people of Kent in their homes, at work, at leisure and through organisations like local government, social groups and businesses to play their part in setting the right environment for these vital insects.

Objective 1

For Kent County Council to manage the land it owns or controls or can influence in a way which can benefit pollinators' forage and habitat.

The Council is:

- putting in place, where it can, revised grass-cutting and pollinator-friendly planting regimes. It is reviewing how it reinstates land and manages it generally on road verges, in maintained schools and parks and all other parts of its estate.
- reviewing the use of pesticides in its estate and seeking to end the use of the controversial neonicotinoid¹ sprays.
- finding ways to create corridors for wildlife throughout the landscape within and adjacent to its estate.
- identifying, promoting and arranging where possible, appropriate training for staff involved in land management (including parks, highways, estate management and grounds maintenance) to better their understanding of the needs of pollinators and how they can help them in the course of their work (where they are not already doing that).
- looking at how it might develop a pollinator impact assessment tool for its land management.
- looking for opportunities to 'green' its buildings and assets with pollinator friendly planting and such things as bee hotels (space people can make for solitary bees to nest).

Objective 2

For Kent County Council to use the planning system to protect pollinators and improve the habitats on which they rely.

The Council is:

- looking to support the connection of landscapes to each other.
- looking to develop approaches within KCC's planning services that will help to protect pollinator habitats.
- using the Kent Design Guide, Kent Planning Officers Group and other appropriate means to work with Kent's district planning authorities to encourage developments that improve pollinator habitats.
- working with community groups and through the Kent Association of Local Councils to map pollinator features at a community level in order to help people to take action.
- looking to understand and better articulate the economic value of pollinators to Kent.
- looking at how it might develop a pollinator impact assessment tool to inform planning decisions.

¹ a systemic agricultural insecticide resembling nicotine; studies have found a link between neonicotinoids and declining bee populations

Objective 3

To mobilise the people of Kent, to take action themselves. Kent's Plan Bee aims to help them to greater awareness of the importance of pollinators in all our lives and everybody's need and ability to act to protect them.

A communications plan is essential because it is about telling the people (of Kent) the story of the dangers pollinators now face and how they can help to make their prospects much better. The communications plan will include:

- Signage explaining some aspects of land management such as why verges have not been cut
- on site and digital.
- encouragement for pollinator friendly gardening
- a Kent wildflower seed packet to be developed with an external sponsor
- a Kent Pollinators' Charter.
- ***The school education plan*** includes more competitions for bee/pollinator projects including a competition to design the Kent's Plan Bee logo.
- ***The plan is building an expert network of advisors and mentors*** to help to guide it and to come up with new ideas for taking it forward.
- ***Kent's Plan Bee is always looking for sponsors*** to support this important work, for instance by helping to fund the Kent Wild Flower Seeds packet

The Council is:

- as part of the Kent Year of Green Action, staging a general bee summit to launch the campaign

Staging a rolling campaign to inform and influence other stakeholders including, but not limited to, education establishments, developers, public authorities and community organisations.

The Long-term Plan

Kent's Plan Bee is a continuing plan which is intended to be long term. The many actions set out and the raising of understanding and determination to act among the county's one and a half million people will necessarily take time.

It will come in phases. Clearly, for instance, not all the summits we hope to do can be done in a year, or even two. Some of the work, like changing grass cutting regimes, is dependent on contract renewals which are not yet due.

The need for this action n for pollinators, Kent's Plan Bee, was agreed unanimously by Kent's County Council in May 2018, underlining the importance the elected members attach to the programme on behalf of the people they represent.

It is being overseen by a cross-party member group which reports to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Highways, Transport and Waste... and ultimately by millions, even billions, of tiny Kent residents on whom we depend, even as they depend on us.