From:	**Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport** **Simon Jones, Corporate Director, Growth, Environment & Transport**
To:	**Growth, Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee Meeting – 13 January 2026**
Subject:	**Highways Verge Improvements for Biodiversity - Update**
Key decision:	**No**
Classification:	**Unrestricted**
Electoral Division:	**All**

Summary: This report provides an update on the Council's work to improve biodiversity within the highway network and what operations we currently undertake to improve the environment and meet the Councils strategies regarding Plan Bee and Plan Tree.

Recommendation(s):
The Cabinet Committee is asked to note our approach to managing biodiversity within the highway network.

1. Background

1.1 The Soft Landscape Team within Highways and Transportation manage all the green assets within the highway boundary. This includes urban verges, shrubs and hedges, rural verges, visibility splays and rural hedges, and all trees within the highway boundary.

1.2 There are around 5,500 miles of road within Kent that the Council is responsible for with the majority containing soft landscape assets. The network of roads across the County lends itself to provide wildlife corridors and interconnecting refuges for wildlife.

1.3 The primary aim of soft landscape maintenance is always highway safety. We do this by improving visibility at junctions and preventing trees, weeds and vegetation from impacting/damaging the highway or property.

1.4 However, the size and scale of the assets within the highway network means that biodiversity improvements can be far reaching and create an impact within the County.

1.5 Taking steps to enhance our road network to deliver biodiverse grass verges is in line with the purposes of Kent's Plan Bee, the Council's Pollinator Action Plan which aims to:

- ensure that pollinators' needs are always considered throughout our work and services.

- put the conservation of pollinators and their habitats at the heart of the council's land management.

1.6 The table below highlights the larger asset groups.

Asset	Quantity
Individual Street Trees	55,000
Groups of Trees or Tree Belts	450,000
Urban Grass	3.2million m²
Visibility Verges	907,000 m^2
Rural Verges	4,600 km
Shrub beds	242,000 m^2
Hedges (Rural & Urban)	110 km

Table 1 – Asset Quantities

2. Landscape Contracts

2.1 A work programme detailing the works within the contracts and when they occur is contained in Appendix 1.

2.2 Our biodiversity improvements are linked to our maintenance contracts which have the following asset groups below:

2.3 Swathe Contracts

2.3.1 A hierarchal approach has been used in the specification for all roads or sites receiving a swathe cut with each road or site being designated within one of three Tiers based upon its identified needs as follows.

- **Tier 1** - Highway Safety Swathe Cut
  Roads with highway safety as their priority need.

- **Tier 2** – Lower Value Biodiversity Swathe Cut
  Roads which offer lower value for biodiversity. They may include but are not limited to Bee Lines, low value Roadside Nature Reserves (RNR), general conservation.

- **Tier 3** – Higher Value Biodiversity Swathe Cut
  These roads or sites will have biodiversity conservation as their priority need and contain protected verges which include but are not limited to SSSI, RNR, Bee Roads, Bee Lines and Higher Value Biodiversity. Verges on these roads may require full width cuts, cut and collect, rotation cutting or other conservation maintenance methods and techniques.

2.4 Urban Contract

2.4.1 Urban grass is sub divided into three types within the contract to enable conservation verges to be included as below.

- **Urban grass** -cut six times to maintain highway safety and improve amenity of highway.

- **Conservation grass** – areas of verge that are medium biodiversity which can be managed accordingly without impacting safety or amenity.

- **Conservation grass cut and collect** – areas of verge that are high in biodiversity where cuttings are collected to impoverish the soil and increase biodiversity.

2.5 **Tree Maintenance Contract**

2.5.1 We have an annual tree planting programme to replace trees, and plant trees from early November to the end of March. We consider a wide range of issues to decide when and where trees are to be planted but follow the “right tree, right place" approach.

- Native species are selected where possible and are preferred.

- Around 850 street trees are planted each year to contribute to *Kents Plan Tree* action plan.

3. What are we doing for Biodiversity?

3.1 **Pollinators**

3.2 As part of *Kents Plan Bee Pollinator Action Plan* we identify ways we can enhance biodiversity and conservation while balancing the important need to keep our highways safe. Appendix 2 shows where all our urban and rural biodiversity verges are located.

3.2.1 Bee roads - We work with the *Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT)* to identify and safeguard important roadside habitats to encourage the growth and spread of key pollinator plants for rare bees.

3.2.2 Bee roads are located along our rural roads and are higher value biodiversity verges (Tier 3). They may receive a 900mm (3 foot) wide cut next to the road edge. We may cut full width once every 2 or 3 years or change the order we cut the roads to give a succession of important food plants for pollinators.

3.2.3 B-lines - An idea borrowed from the *Buglife B-lines* initiative for a series of pollinator insect pathways which connect sites with wildflower rich habitats across our countryside using our road network.

In Kent, we have 4 B-line areas:

1. The main B-line is around our coast.
2. Cross county linking Folkestone to Dartford
3. Tenterden to Maidstone to Dartford
4. Edenbridge, Sevenoaks and Westerham.

3.2.4 Most rural roads along these B-lines have been included within our lower biodiversity cut (Tier 2) and will receive a 900mm wide cut next to the road edge in April and October.

3.3 Roadside Nature Reserves (RNR)

3.3.1 This is a partnership between Kent County Council Highways and Kent Wildlife Trust. It has a Road Verge Project Officer, based with Kent Wildlife Trust, who works with a dedicated team of Voluntary Road Verge Wardens to maintain the condition of the verges and monitor their wildlife interest. A map of our RNR's can be found in Appendix 3.

3.3.2 We have been working with the Kent Wildlife Trust since 1994 to manage Roadside Nature Reserves (RNR) . These may contain threatened habitats or wildlife and include ancient woodland, heathland and chalk grassland. We manage over 130 RNR in line with the Trusts management plans for each site and with assistance from the Trusts volunteer teams.

3.3.3 Most RNR are located on our rural roads and are within our higher value biodiversity cut (Tier 3). They may receive a 900mm wide cut next to the road edge or a full width cut to the rear of the verge in early spring or late autumn. Some have the cuttings raked up to help reduce the build-up of nutrients in the soil and are removed by us or by the trust's volunteers.

3.4 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

3.4.1 We manage verges near or in SSSI for wildlife according to the citations and requirements of *Natural England*.

3.4.2 Most SSSI are along our rural roads and are within our higher value biodiversity cuts. They may receive a 900mm wide cut next to the road edge, or a full width cut to the rear of the verge in early spring or late autumn. Some RNR sites are also within a SSSI.

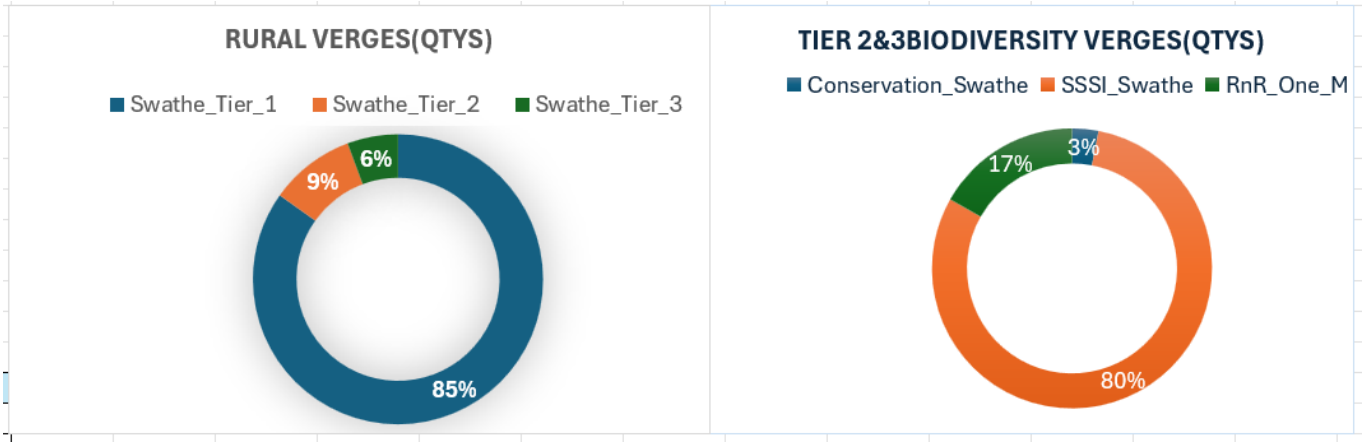
3.5 Wildflowers

3.5.1 We look after wildflowers on rural verges. Where possible we allow wildflowers to die back before mowing. This may not always be possible if safety is an issue.

3.5.2 Bulbs in urban grass areas will not be cut until 6 weeks after the flowering period so they will grow the following year. These are cut in our planned grass schedule. While the flowers are dying back the grass will be left uncut.

4. Assets under Environmental Management

4.1 The rural contract contains the majority of our enhanced verges with approx. 15% of all of our verges under some sort of management plan. Of these SSSI verges are the highest.



Asset	Qty(km)
Swathe_Tier_1 (KM)	3,985.09
Swathe_Tier_2 (KM)	447.09
Swathe_Tier_3 (KM)	265.59

Table 2- Overall Swathe Figures

5. Projects

5.1 Ebbsfleet Development Corporation – Verge Enhancement

5.1.1 We are working in partnership with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation to enhance the habitat and planting at highway verge and roundabout sites across Ebbsfleet Garden City. This programme of works aims to demonstrate both parties' commitment to high quality, sustainable placemaking across Ebbsfleet Garden City.

5.1.2 The project proposes to deliver an exemplar approach to design and maintenance of green infrastructure and the creation of ecological value at key gateways into the Garden City, to include roundabouts, verges and along primary road environments. Appendix 4 identifies these locations.

5.1.3 The project is championed and funded by Ebbsfleet Development Corporation but will be delivered in partnership with KCC, with the intention for KCC to lead the delivery of the landscaping improvements on highway land.

5.2 Shared Outcome Fund

5.2.1 KCC has been a key partner in the Trees Outside Woodland research programme since 2020, it was a project funded by HM Government and

delivered in partnership with The Tree Council, Natural England, Defra, and four other local authorities and finished Sept 2025.

5.2.2 The aim of the programme was to test innovative methods to increase non-woodland tree cover, looking to address funding barriers by investigating ways to reduce the costs, and enhance tree stock resilience.

5.2.3 Urban Tree Establishment

- Miyawaki method trials (Phase 1 and 2) - 11 sites (**6,655** trees)
- Natural regeneration trials (Phase 1) - 4 sites

5.2.4 Free Tree Scheme 2022/23

- 1,181 total applications
- 80% over subscribed
- 203 successful recipients
- **17,910** trees given out

Approximately 35,706 trees planted in Kent throughout the duration of the project.

5.3 **PoMS FIT Count**

5.3.1 Set up by the UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme. Flower-Insect Timed Count. Highways have been monitoring 40 verges since 2023.

5.3.2 A 10-minute survey of a small patch of flowers, counting all the insects that land on highway verges during that time.

5.3.3 Selected urban and rural verges across Kent – identified as tier 3 conservation verges and some control sites.

5.3.4 The data will be collected and analysed by Plan Bee and also submitted to PoMS FIT count national scheme. Over time, data collected from selected road verges will provide evidence for the impact of conservation cuts (conservation verges vs. control verges).

5.3.5 This evidence will also contribute to the bigger picture on the impact of Kent's Plan Bee overall – are we making a difference?

6. Challenges

6.1 The rural swathe contract originally had two main safety cuts. One at the beginning of the year in April/May with another cut during September. This timing meant that the main cut did not take place during the main flowering season over the summer. The decision was made to reverse the provision for two cuts and revert to one in 2022 to reduce financial pressure on the Council. This meant a reduction in biodiversity value of highway verges.

6.2 The primary aim of our maintenance regimes is to provide a safe highway and to reduce our liabilities. This significantly limits the opportunities for including verges within biodiversity schemes.

6.3 It is not always clear that highway verges are being managed for biodiversity and enquiries and complaints regarding verges not being cut can be made. To offset this many of our verges are subject to a number of regimes; a regular perimeter cut to show that we haven't missed the verge coupled with the later conservation cut.

6.4 Having many different work types can be confusing for contractors when they are cutting. Knowing when to start and stop a tractor flail did present problems in the past with verges being cut incorrectly. Advancements in technology and regular contractor updates has now made this a rare occurrence.

6.5 Managing for biodiversity can cost more than regular maintenance, for instance collecting arisings or cutting long grass is more costly. Only verges that have a higher biodiversity value are therefore considered for this type of maintenance.

7. Policy Framework

7.1 Managing highway verges for the benefit of biodiversity supports the following:

- KCC's Strategic Vision through the Strategic Outcomes: 'Kent's physical and natural environment is protected, enhanced and enjoyed by residents and visitors.
- The Kent and Medway Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Kent's Plan Bee pollinator action plan
- Kents Plan Tree

7.2 The recent Environment Act (2021) has amended the existing Biodiversity Duty of the 2006 NERC Act and now specifically requires public authorities to look strategically at their policies and operations and assess what action they can take to further the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity.

8. Conclusion

8.1 The Council has implemented Plan Bee as part of its environmental strategy to improve the biodiversity across its assets. The current approach to managing the highway soft estate allows for this improvement to take place.

8.2 Whilst the emphasis is clearly on safety there are process' in the current contracts that provide enough flexibility to enhance biodiversity within the highway network.

8.3 We have seen the emphasis of the soft landscape service change over recent years from one of purely maintaining for safety reasons to one where we are maintaining highway safety whilst delivering key Kent County Council Environmental strategies within the service.

9. Recommendation:

9.1 The Cabinet Committee is asked to note our approach to managing biodiversity within the highway network.

10. Background Documents

- Appendix 1 - Landscape Programmes
- Appendix 2 - Location of Biodiversity Verges
- Appendix 3 - Roadside Nature Reserve Maps
- Appendix 4 – Ebbsfleet Development Enhancement Sites

11. Contact Details

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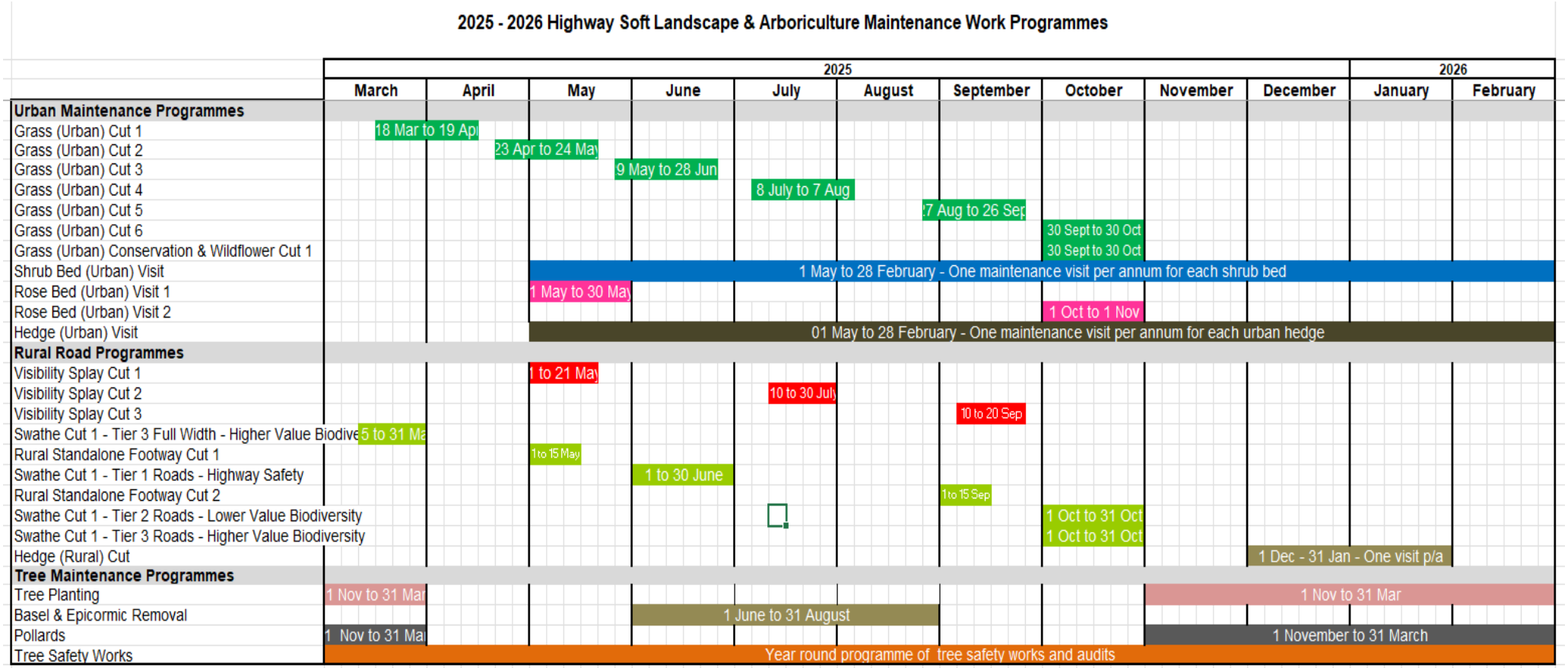
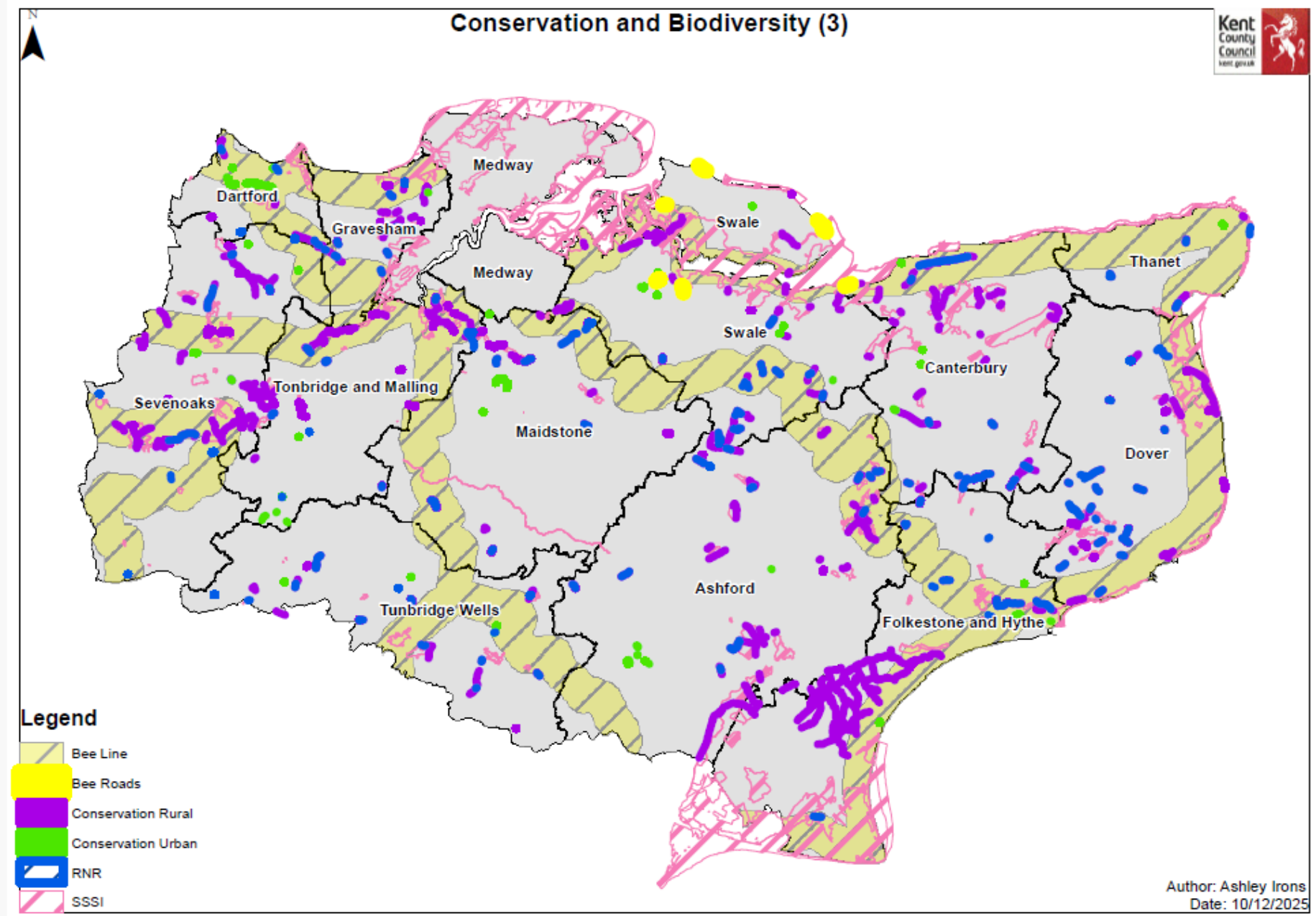
Appendix 1 – Work Programmes

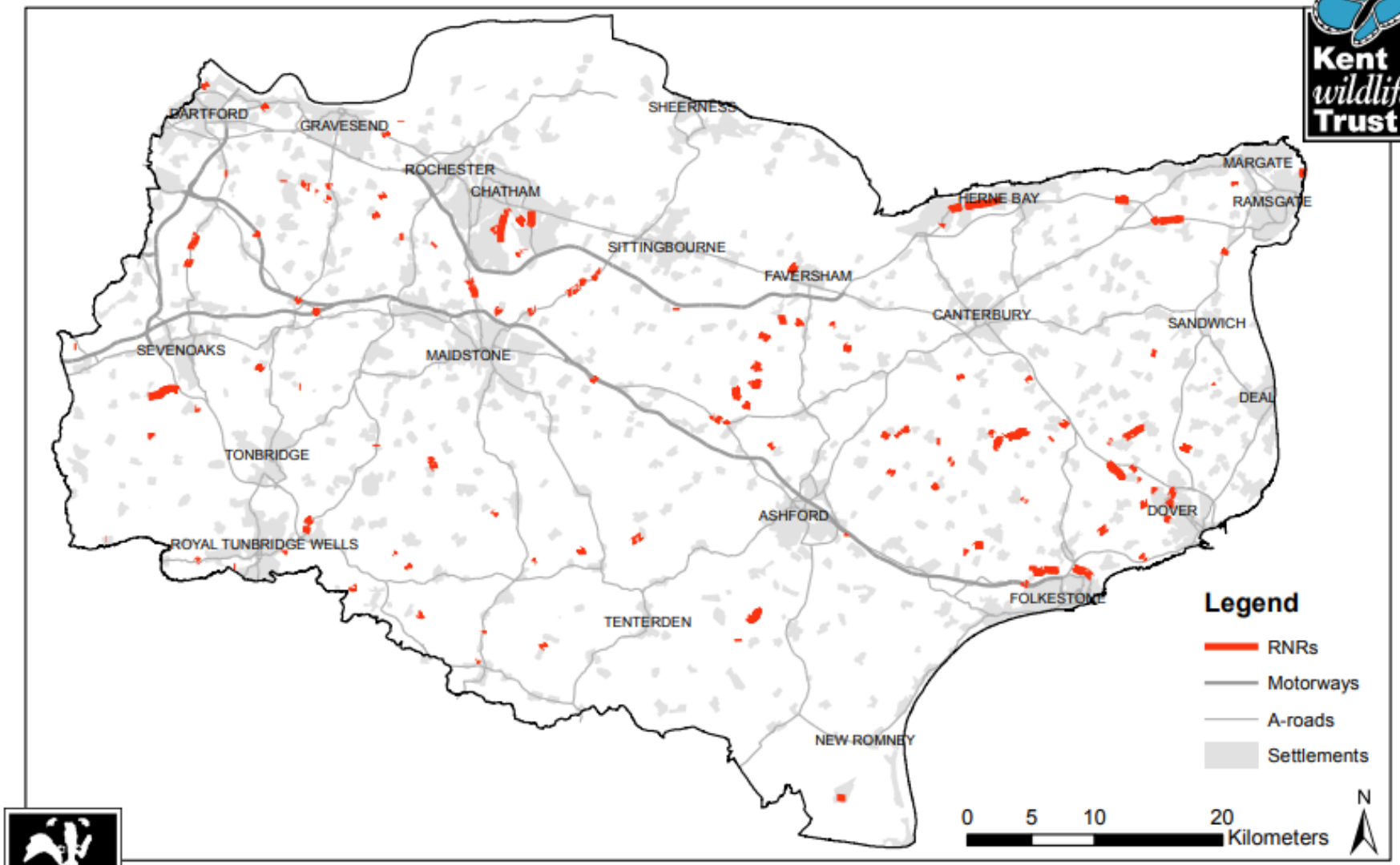


Appendix 2 – Location of Pollinator Verges



Appendix 3 – Roadside Nature Reserve Locations

Roadside Nature Reserves in Kent & Medway



Appendix 4 – Ebbsfleet Development Corporation – Enhanced verges