

# East Herts Environment and Climate Forum Meeting

## Biodiversity and the natural environment

## Thursday 21st January 2020: 18:30 – 20:00pm via Zoom

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### Introduction

#### Cllr Graham McAndrew, Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability,

Cllr McAndrew introduced the meeting, explained its format and outlined the content and contribution of the last Forum meeting in November - [Decarbonising Transport](https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/about-east-herts-0/environmental-sustainability/sustainability-get-involved). Note of this meeting can be found on our website alongside a copy of the [East Herts Action Plan](https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/about-east-herts-0/environmental-sustainability/environmental-sustainability-action-plan) and other organic improvements that are being made to the [Environmental Sustainability pages](file:///\\VMFile01\Linda.Meehan$\Environmental%20Sustainability%20|%20East%20Herts%20District%20Council). He then introduced the topic for this meeting.

Biodiversity and natural land use is an important area for attention and action in the East Herts Action Plan. For example, the council is planning the first in a proposed series of Rural Round Tables in February which includes the objectives of developing sustainability, wildlife conservation and carbon reduction initiatives in our local land use.

He then summarised the presentations to follow:

* Tim Hill representing Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, looking at the background to biodiversity, a review of ‘The state of nature report 2020’; some of the species lost and the reason why; links between this biodiversity emergency and the climate crisis and what we can all do about making a difference to biodiversity; followed by:
* Jan Stannard from Heal Rewilding introducing the Heal Rewilding project, why it came into existence; volunteering opportunities; the wildlife work she does in Maidenhead and how all of this may be transferable to us in East Hertfordshire.
* An update on the East Herts Action Plan, as follows:

### East Herts Environmental Sustainability Action Plan

#### Jonathan Geall, Head of Housing and Health for East Herts Council

#### Action plan review

The Environmental Sustainability Action Plan is a working document which sets out the actions that the Council is taking to deliver the carbon neutrality targets within the East Herts Climate Motion.

East Herts is revisiting its Terms of Reference for the Action Plan with a view to potentially including a much wider view of sustainability issues and associated timetable for action, beyond immediate carbon measures. Additionally the intention is also to include relevant emerging actions as they arise from the work of the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP). The HCCSP, which East Herts along with all the other districts, HCC and also the LEP are members of, is initially developing four main action plans. These relate to water, biodiversity, carbon reduction and transport. Each has a working group charged with development of each thread.

Specifically in relation to the East Herts plan, Jonathan highlighted some key areas of progress made on projects since the last Forum meeting:

**Use of regulatory powers to promote action by others.**

* The Council will move to 100% renewable electricity in April across all compatible facilities, which represents the majority (circa 95%). Options for converting the remaining metered supplies are being explored.
* Engagement with main contractors is underway to understand and assist with their current commitments towards carbon reduction.

**Use of regulatory powers to promote action by others.**

* The Sustainability Planning Document (SPD) is nearing completion and will be presented to Council for approval on 2nd March.  This is a significant document which forms a large part of the Council’s planning policy.

**Influence and encourage others to participate.**

* The public are looking to the Local Authority for sources of information and direction so this is now pulled together in one place. The sustainability page on the East Herts website now contains information on central and local Government grant schemes, hints and tips for home energy efficiency and ways for the community to get involved.
* Another example of encouraging partners to participate is the project to develop options for rural EV charging hubs, which have been presented to Parish representatives. A follow up meeting is scheduled for February to move the project forward.

### Wilder East Herts

#### Tim Hill, Conservation Manager, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust

#### Presentation

Cllr McAndrew introduced Tim.

As Conservation Manager with Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Tim leads on the Trust’s work in the wider countryside for wildlife and people. He has been working as a conservation professional for over 30 years, beginning his career as a ranger in the Peak District National Park. In a voluntary capacity he is a Trustee of the Hertfordshire Natural History Society.

His presentation covered the following background, topics, facts and initiatives:

* Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust is one of 47 Trusts across the country, established in 1964, now supporting 40 managed nature reserves and the wider countryside. The trust provides places for people to experience wildlife and enjoy green space.
* Putting some context around the climate and nature crisis, Tim highlighted some key findings from their [State of Nature report](https://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/stateofnature), published in March 2020, and which collects biological data from around the county.
* 7500 different species were assesses. The analysis looked at how numbers had changed between 1970 and 2020 via 2.8 million individual reports on those species. The conclusion drawn was there had been 76 local extinctions (3 every 2 years) during that time. These include Nightingales, Adders, White Clawed Cray Fish and Willow Tits. Tim emphasised that these were occurrences happening on our doorstep with 1504 species now highlighted for local concern as a consequence of loss of structure in our woodlands, wetlands, grasslands and the like.
* 22,000 hectares of appropriate habitat needs to be created to prevent further extinctions. Taking grasslands as an example, Tim explained that not much is left and site disjointedness is exacerbating the issue. Connectivity enables wildlife to move from one site to another to eliminate small sites being susceptible to local extinctions i.e. through fire or disease.
* Increasing greenhouse gasses and temperatures have resulted in habitat and associated biodiversity loss across the world. This equally has an impact on health (as seen during Covid lockdown) where huge interest has been placed on the link between mental wellbeing and access to wild, natural habitats.
* Tim explained what he believed we should be doing to address the crisis from an East Herts Nature perspective. Focus areas include understanding which species are present; which sites are of interest; how they being managed and, once issues are scoped, how we should get into immediate action. If we don’t know, how can we act? An example of this is linking carbon with soil health. How much more carbon could East Herts as an area manage and hold, for example?
* An audit of our environment would be a huge benefit. Sir David King referenced carbon capture and storage as the only hope for mankind and soil which could capture and hold more carbon has become degraded. We need to re-wild our soils.
* Slides were shown illustrating how rich soils can hold more carbon and help wildlife recover, boosting natural resilience and helping with carbon capture. Black Knapweed, Meadow Vetchling and Bird’s-foot Trefoil were cited as great species for this purpose.
* Tim’s full presentation slide deck provides more action points and also references a project in St Albans which helps residents take action.
* In conclusion, more space is required for nature. Reducing consumerism, water consumption to save our chalk rivers, ‘going wild’ at home and volunteering were also cited as contributions that individuals and communities can make immediately.
* If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us. – David Attenborough

### Heal Rewilding

#### Jan Stannard – Co-founder and Chair of Trustees, Heal Rewilding

#### Presentation

Jan is the co-founder and Chair of Trustees of Heal which is a new national rewilding charity and now the focus of her work. She is also a trustee of Wild Maidenhead, a local wildlife campaigning and activity group.  She leads the swift group for Maidenhead, Marlow and Cookham and has helped organise hundreds of swift box installations locally, as well as helping nationally with swifts. She also runs England’s largest toad ladder project in her area and is a non-executive on the board of an EV charging community called Bookmycharge. She has strong and fond links with the East Herts area having spent time here as a child.

* Jan explained her drivers for setting up the Heal Rewilding charity *– “If you love something then you have to do something to save it”*. She was aware of the environmental contribution that creating more wild spaces can make and so the Heal initiative was formed. She spoke of a required shift in thinking and action and believes this shift is underway.
* Heal’s mission to raise money; buy land and re-wild it. The project covers England and Wales and is currently seeking land for purchase between Somerset and Kent.
* Rewilding as an approach is a nature led. Jan cited the principles of the farm at KNEPP as a framework for the charity. KNEPP is a 3,500-acre farm, 45 miles from London, which was once a conventional dairy and arable operation and now a profitable rewilded farm. Contrary to popular beliefs that cattle are harmful to the environment (note: through intensive and currently conventional methods of cattle farming) they have been a central contributor to the restoration of the land into a fully functional eco-systems. The cycle of their consumption, fertilisation and seed spread on the land, as well as the weight of their hooves to restore soil health, helps to regenerate it. Large animals in general (and in the instance at KNEPP also includes pigs and deer) are required to have this action on the landscape.
* By helping to restore absent species, bio-diversity is enabled to thrive. This in turn contributes to reducing climate change. Human wellbeing is also improved by providing access to nature.
* Moving onto the rationale for the Heal charity model, Jan explained that the land to be rewilded needs to be owned. Land payment systems can play a part but if the land being rewilded is owned in perpetuity, it can be changed in perpetuity.
* Using a crowd funding model, Heal is well on its way to raising £5 million since its inception 9 months ago (March 20). Sponsorship of a square meter contribution costs £20, which is then grid referenced using the What3Words location pinpointing App. The Charity has 5 trustees, dozens of advisors, links with wildlife trusts and engages many young people.

### Break Out rooms

Tim Hill, Jonathan Geall and David Thorogood (Environmental Sustainability Co-ordinator at East Herts Council) each hosted breakout rooms for discussion and Q&A amongst the attendees. The hosts summarised the themes discussed in each room when the Forum resumed:

**Room 1** - A wide conversation was held around the following issues: housing/planning and setting aside areas for rewilding; observed lack of co-ordination, overall plan and audit of East Hertfordshire’s land; Parish Council’s don’t know what actions to take; requirement for consistency and a baseline, and guidance, information and training to help all community stakeholders take steps towards the right sort of actions.

**Room2** – Discussion centred around: regenerative agriculture and ‘no till initiatives; carbon held within the soil; how to maintain our open spaces and the contribution of contactors in that aim; connectivity of land and wildlife corridors and, the opportunities in considering bio-diversity more rigorously alongside the requirement for housing developments.

**Room 3** – Themes in this room included: potential for establishing community wildlife areas (within play areas for example); biodiversity opportunities on highway verges along with appropriate management and especially the ongoing development of appropriate highways maintenance policy; the importance of maintaining/enhancing bee highways; wildlife corridors and how to create them using these to join to both pocket and larger sites; adopt a local tree pit; housing development density and its impact on biodiversity especially that focussed more dense development may be advantageous to wildlife by reducing settlement footprint; the need for guidance and encouraging behaviour change; and, ensuring we have up to date information on how land is managed in East Herts along with the need to work with farmers and land owners as stewards of the local environment.

**Close**

Cllr McAndrew thanked everyone for attending and for their active participation. He reiterated that all comments from the meeting are taken on board and are considered for inclusion on the East Herts Action Plan: ‘You said we did’. He urged all to keep in contact and confirmed that a summary of the meeting, would be shared on the East Herts website Environmental Sustainability page.

The next Forum meeting date was noted as follows:

17th March 2021: 10:30am – 12:00pm.