

Policy X: Biodiversity and geodiversity

1) What is the policy seeking to achieve?

Stoke Gabriel Parish has a rich biodiversity resource. A key aim for the Neighbourhood Plan is therefore to protect and enhance biodiversity habitats in the Parish, and enhance local and sub-regional ecological networks. The Neighbourhood Plan also seeks to establish a premise of biodiversity 'net gain' to augment future development in the Parish.

2) What is the evidence behind the policy?

Stoke Gabriel Parish has a rich biodiversity resource, comprising a range of habitats and ecosystems which support a significant number of species, including protected species. Habitats are varied and include gardens, farmland, woodland, streams and the tidal River Dart. These varied habitats support a great diversity of plants, birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. The Parish's biodiversity resource is a key component in its distinctive character and comprises an important element of local and sub-regional ecological networks in south Devon.

The Parish also has a rich geodiversity resource. This is a key determinant to the distribution of habitats and species, and has a close influence on landscape character, the historic environment and local distinctiveness.

An overview of the key designations and features of biodiversity and geodiversity interest in the Parish is presented below.

County Wildlife Sites

Six County Wildlife Sites are present in the Parish. County Wildlife Sites are sites locally designated for biodiversity, designated due to the presence of particular habitats and species. They are designated using a strict set of criteria and each site is assessed against these criteria by a panel of experts. Whilst they are not legally protected, they comprise a network of non-statutory wildlife sites which form key parts of Devon's ecological networks. The County Wildlife Sites in the Parish are as follows:

- Ham Copse
- Broadleigh Farm Orchard
- Byter Mill Copse
- The Mill Pool
- South Downs & Great Woods
- The Cliffs

County Geological Sites

County Geological Sites are locally designated geological sites that are considered to be especially important for the geodiversity they exhibit. There is one County Geological Site located in the Parish, at Waddeton Quarry. The site has been designated for its exposures of a wide range of lithological & structural features associated with the Torquay limestone, which can be seen at both the quarry and the foreshore at this location.

Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats and ancient woodland

UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats cover a wide range of semi-natural habitat types, and were those that were identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

A significant number of priority habitats are present in the Parish, including deciduous woodland, traditional orchard, good quality semi-improved grassland and mudflats.

There are also a number of areas of ancient woodland (woodland that has existed since 1600AD) in the Parish. Comprising some of the richest land-based habitat for wildlife, these include Ham Copse, Great Wood and Tors/Barn Woods.

Strategic Nature Areas

Recognising the Parish's importance as an integral part of local and sub-regional ecological networks, a significant part of the Parish is within a Strategic Nature Area. Strategic Nature Areas (SNAs) are landscape scale areas of land that have been selected by Biodiversity South West as being important areas for the conservation and expansion of particular habitat types in Devon. They are areas of Devon's countryside which contain higher than average concentrations of existing biodiversity habitats. The SNAs present in the Parish include: Woodland SNA, which covers the banks of the river Dart, extending over much of Stoke Gabriel village, the Mill Pool/Byter Mill valley, and towards Aish; and Mudflats SNA, which covers the River Dart.

Figure X highlights the key biodiversity and geodiversity sites in the Parish.

To include map of biodiversity and geodiversity assets in the Parish.

The Dart Estuary Marine Conservation Zone

The Dart Estuary Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) was designated in May 2019. The MCZ is an inshore site that covers an area of approximately 5 km² and encompasses the upper part of the Dart estuary down to Anchor Stone, south of Dittisham. It covers the whole of the River Dart in the Parish, excluding the Mill Pool.

The site supports a diverse array of habitats and species, including a number of rare species. The estuary has an important role as a nursery ground for juvenile fish, and large areas of the site consist of intertidal mud, which is a highly productive habitat and provides feeding and resting grounds for wading and migratory birds. The site is also an important habitat for the tentacled lagoon worm (*Alkmaria romijni*), which is scarce throughout the UK and lives within a tube made of mud in sheltered lagoons and estuaries. They are particularly vulnerable to changes to their habitat.

South Hams SAC and Greater Horseshoe Bats

Whilst no internationally designated sites (such as Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas or Ramsar Sites) or nationally designated sites (such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest) are present within the Parish, the Parish contains key habitats and species which are central to the integrity of these sites.

The Greater Horseshoe Bat is one of Britain's largest and rarest bats, with a total population of about 5,500 individuals. A significant proportion of this population is found in South Devon. Greater Horseshoe Bats use the wider countryside of South Devon for the majority of their activities, including commuting, foraging, roosting, and mating. Linked to this, the South Hams Special Area of Conservation (SAC) has been designated by Natural England to help protect a population of over 2,000 Greater Horseshoe Bats.

To facilitate effective decision making associated with the South Hams SAC, important strategic flyways and key foraging/ sustenance zones for Greater Horseshoe Bats in South Devon have been identified using the best available scientific knowledge.

The eastern half of the parish, including Waddeton and approximately half of the village of Stoke Gabriel, is within the South Hams SAC Berry Head Greater Horseshoe Bat Sustenance Zone. These

are areas within 4km of the designated roosts which have been determined to potentially include critical foraging habitat and commuting routes.

In addition, there are a number of strategic Greater Horseshoe Bat flyways in the Parish. These include along the banks of the River Dart, and from the River Dart along the Mill Pool/ Byter Mill Copse valley towards Yalberton.

The extent of the Greater Horseshoe Bat sustenance zones and the flyways within the Parish is highlighted in the map below.

To include map of Greater Horseshoe Bat sustenance zones and the flyways

Species

To include an overview of the key species present in the Parish

3) What does the community say?

Community consultation undertaken on the Neighbourhood Plan to date has highlighted the importance of habitats and species as a key part of the Parish's character and local distinctiveness. In this context the biodiversity of the Parish was identified as a central component of what makes the Parish special for both residents and visitors alike.

A significant number of those responding to the Neighbourhood Plan questionnaire highlighted the need to protect biodiversity in the Parish, and secure environmental enhancements which would support wildlife. Trees, hedgerows and verges were identified as key parts of the Parish's landscape and villagescape which should be protected. Protection of areas of biodiversity sensitivity, such as the River Dart, orchards, woodland, the Mill Pond and the Byter Mill valley were also identified by many of those responding to the questionnaire as key priorities. This was accompanied by a desire within the community for continued and enhanced access to these assets, alongside their protection.

4) Policy SGX: Biodiversity and geodiversity policy

Biodiversity sites

In considering development proposals, full account will be given to any potential adverse impacts on designated biodiversity sites, including, in the Parish, County Wildlife Sites. Development should not take place which will lead to the loss of areas of Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat or ancient woodland.

New development will also be expected to ensure that any potential adverse effects on the integrity of the Dart Estuary MCZ are avoided or mitigated.

On-site biodiversity assets and biodiversity net gain

Development proposals should maintain and enhance existing on-site biodiversity assets, delivering 'net environmental gain' in line with national policy, the JLP, and provide for wildlife needs on site, where possible. For smaller sites, a contribution to biodiversity enhancement elsewhere in the Parish may be made. Developers should seek to ensure habitats for wildlife are enhanced and left in a measurably better state than they were pre-development.

On-site biodiversity enhancements such as new roosting features for bats, nesting features for birds or boxes and bricks for invertebrates should be incorporated into the fabric of the development. Native hedges and flower rich meadows should be incorporated within new development.

Ecological networks

Proposals for new development should provide wildlife corridors that allow wildlife to move from one area of habitat to another. Development proposals which link up existing areas of biodiversity interest will be considered favourably.

Green space and landscape buffers in development should provide new habitats through development and related planting schemes. Where ecologically relevant, fences and walls should be designed to incorporate features that allow dispersal of wildlife through areas of green space and gardens.

Where appropriate, new development should be undertaken in association with the landscape-scale enhancements proposed through, for example, the Strategic Nature Area network or in association with the national-level Nature Recovery Network.

The South Hams SAC and Greater Horseshoe Bats

Development proposals should seek to support the integrity of the South Hams Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Where development proposals are located within the established South Hams SAC Berry Head Greater Horseshoe Bat Sustenance Zone and/or within strategic Greater Horseshoe Bat flyways, the following provisions should apply:

- Commuting routes and foraging areas should be retained where they can be effectively protected and appropriately managed for bats.
- Early engagement of an ecological consultant, followed by early consultation with South Hams District Council, Devon County Council and Natural England should be undertaken to assess the site and advise on the scope of survey and mitigation that will be required.
- Mitigation proposals should be developed in close consultation with other professionals such as highways/lighting engineers, landscape architects and designers to ensure that they are realistic, achievable and deliverable, and can be maintained in the long-term without creating conflicts with the needs or aspirations of highways users and local residents.

A Mitigation Strategy should be submitted with the planning application, which sets out how potential impacts will be avoided as part of the application. The scope of this document will be dependent on the nature and scale of the anticipated impacts, but will need to include full details of any replacement roosts (including location and detailed design), and new connective habitat. In terms of lighting, dark corridors must be maintained around roosts, foraging areas and commuting corridors with no net increase in light levels as a result of the development in areas used by bats.

Geodiversity

Where relevant, development proposals should:

- Make a positive contribution to the protection and enhancement of geodiversity in the Parish.
- Protect County Geological Sites.