

Biodiversity Opportunity Area Statement



Name: North Kent Marshes

Description: The North Kent Marshes are designated, almost in their entirety, as SSSI, SPA and/or Ramsar, and are of national and international importance for breeding and overwintering bird populations. The area includes three areas recommended to be Marine Conservation Zones: the Thames Estuary rMCZ, (on hold) which provides critical spawning and nursery grounds for fish, the Medway Estuary MCZ, designated for a range of estuarine habitats as well as for the tentacled lagoon worm and The Swale Estuary rMCZ (under consultation), supporting seagrass and mussel beds and rich muddy gravels. The opportunity area also includes a few LWSs such as the Diggs and Sheppey Court Marshes near Queenborough, Graveney Dykes and Pasture, Minster Marshes and Minster Cliffs. Much of this Biodiversity Opportunity Area is included in the Greater Thames Estuary Nature Improvement Area.

National Character Area(s): Greater Thames Estuary

Kent Landscape Character Area(s): Eastern Thames Marshes, Hoo Peninsula, Medway Marshes, Swale Marshes, North Sheppey and Eastern Swale Marshes.

Landscape Character: An open and remote landscape characterised by grazing marsh associated with wetlands. Fields are bounded by creeks and ditches – many of which have a long history, creating a distinctive pattern. These landscape features support salt marsh and intertidal mudflats stretching from the River Thames estuary in the west to the Swale Estuary in the east. Settlements and roads are limited in this area, low but prominent hills typically with settlements or copses of trees. Saltmarsh extends inland along creeks and drainage dykes and in places grazing marsh has been converted to arable cultivation.

Geology: Thanet beds and London Clay, with alluvial deposits.

Biodiversity:

- 1 Internationally important grazing marsh, saltmarsh and mudflats.
- 2 Coastal habitats, freshwater wetlands and flower-rich grassland, as well as less common shingle, saline lagoon and soft-cliff habitats.
- 3 The marine habitats provide breeding habitat and rich nursery grounds for fish, including Dover sole, salmon, flounder, cod, herring, sprat, twait shad, both river and sea lampreys and the short-snouted seahorse. The bed of the estuary is known to support ross worms which construct jumbles of sandy tubes, forming a habitat structure used by other species.
- 4 Nationally important woodlands occur at Chattenden and Northward Hill.
- 5 The area is important for a large number of breeding and wintering birds, including marsh harrier, redshank, reed bunting, grey plover, dunlin, avocet and brent goose. Other key species include least lettuce, brown hare, water vole, great crested newt, shrill carder bumblebee, and important assemblages of water beetles. Common seals are present in the estuary and haul out on mud banks and islands. The Hoo Peninsula is an important area for serotine bats, and there is a localized population of adders at Riverside Country Park.

Targets:

- 1 Protect and enhance existing important marine and terrestrial habitats. Coastal defence projects and managed realignment should contribute to maintenance, enhancement, or extension of coastal habitats, with no net loss of habitats of existing importance.
- 2 Deliver more, bigger, better and connected habitats as part of a functioning ecological network which supports more resilient and diverse populations of important wildlife. The Greater Thames Estuary Nature Improvement Area business plan is one of the mechanisms to contribute to achieving this.
- 3 Restore grazing marsh on improved grassland in order to extend and connect existing habitats. This should include restoration or enhancement of at least 200ha of grazing marsh on the Hoo Peninsula, adjoining the South Thames Estuary and Marshes SSSI, and restoration or enhancement of at least 100ha of grazing marsh on the Swale, adjoining The Swale SSSI.

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- 4 Create new intertidal mudflat and saltmarsh to help offset historical losses across the UK, this should include making a significant contribution to the Kent Biodiversity Strategy target of creating 50 ha of intertidal sediment habitat by 2020.
- 5 Maintain total extent of coastal vegetated shingle habitat, in line with the UK target. This is a 'no net loss' target to take account of the dynamic nature of shingle, and includes the maintenance of transitions to other habitats landward and seaward.
- 6 Conserve and enhance important intertidal and marine habitats: secure the protection of important marine habitats through Marine Conservation Zone designation; implement appropriate management of Marine Protected Areas to allow marine habitats and associated species to recover.
- 7 Maintain and enhance important ecological features within new development and create ecological networks within the built environment.
- 8 Implement a sustainable access strategy, including the creation of alternative natural greenspace, to mitigate recreational impacts including monitoring the impact of new development and coastal access.
- 9 Action for naturally widely dispersed habitats (ponds, traditional orchards), wildlife associated with arable farmland, and widely dispersed species such as great crested newt will need to focus across the whole of the area and not just within the Biodiversity Opportunity Area boundary.

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How should Biodiversity Opportunity Area maps and statements be used?

1. The BOA maps can be seen as a spatial reflection of the Kent Biodiversity Strategy. They indicate where the delivery of Kent Biodiversity Strategy targets should be focused in order to secure the maximum biodiversity benefits. The BOA maps also show where the greatest gains can be made from habitat enhancement, restoration and recreation, as these areas offer the best opportunities for establishing large habitat areas and/or networks of wildlife habitats. As such, they will be useful to local planning authorities in the development and delivery of Green Infrastructure and resilient ecological networks. The BOA statement documents will provide guidance on the conservation priorities which should be adopted in each area.
2. Information provided on the habitats and species associated with each BOA is not definitive. Rather, it identifies those priority habitats for which the area is known to be most important, and provides a range of examples of priority species for which the area is known to be important. It is likely that each BOA will support additional habitats and species of principle importance for the conservation of biodiversity, and reference should be made to the Kent Habitat Survey and the Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre to support decision-making.
3. Biodiversity targets identified in the statement documents incorporate, where appropriate, targets in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy. However, not all targets in the Strategy are easily spatially defined, and the BOA maps and statements should be read alongside relevant Action Plans in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy.
4. The BOA maps should not be seen as planning constraint maps. It is not intended or proposed that nature conservation becomes the primary land-use within the target areas, so long as the targets and objectives for each area can be met, and development of any kind is not precluded. However, consideration might in some cases need to be given to ensuring that development within a BOA did not significantly increase the fragmentation of wildlife habitats within target areas or neutralize significant opportunities for habitat restoration or recreation.
5. BOA boundaries are not absolute. They have been drawn to follow mapped boundaries wherever possible in order to facilitate spatial planning and decision-making. However, a project immediately outside the mapped boundary should not be immediately dismissed if it would help to deliver the targets identified for the BOA concerned. It is also not the case that all land within a BOA offers the same opportunities for habitat restoration or recreation, and reference should be made to the Habitat Opportunity maps on the Kent Landscape Information System, when this becomes available, to support detailed decision-making.
6. The areas outside the identified BOAs still have substantial biodiversity interest, and include a number of nature reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, ancient woodlands and other areas of habitats. Although the focus of any biodiversity action should be on the BOAs, it will still be necessary to maintain, enhance, buffer and extend areas of wildlife habitat outside the mapped areas in order to maintain the wildlife interest and richness of the wider countryside.
7. Some biodiversity interest is not well served by the BOA mapping process, and action for ponds, traditional orchards, wildlife associated with arable farmland, and widely dispersed species such as great crested newt will need to focus across the whole of Kent and Medway and not just within identified Opportunity Areas.
8. While the primary purpose of the BOAs is to direct positive action for nature conservation, information on landscape has been included in the target documents. Reference should be made to AONB management plans or other landscape policy documents in drawing up proposals for habitat restoration or recreation in order to maximize the positive benefits for landscape and avoid conflict with features of landscape importance.

Kent Nature Partnership – <http://www.kentnature.org.uk/>

Kent & Medway Biological Records Centre – www.kmbrc.org.uk