Cumbria Wildlife Trust

CONTAINER FLORAL DISPLAYS

Preliminary research on increasing biodiversity and sustainability in Workington town centre

September 2024 Report

Tanya St. Pierre,
September 2024

1. Summary

Cumbria Wildlife Trust was commissioned by Workington Town Council to undertake research on what other councils do in terms of managing and maintaining their floral displays, and highlight best practices to follow. Considerations included pollinator-friendly planting, increasing biodiversity within the town, sustainable planting, peat-free choices, environmentally-friendly activity, community involvement and watering/maintenance practices.

In total, 24 councils were researched as part of this study. All had taken positive steps to make their floral displays and planters more environmentally-friendly and sustainable, with the majority of councils referencing how the positive actions they were taking directly met climate and biodiversity objectives, in both local and national strategies. For example, the government's target to become carbon neutral by 2050; and the UK's 30 by 30 target that aims to reverse the decline of nature.

To determine 'best practice', information was sought from leading horticulture organisations such as the Royal Horticultural Society and Britain in Bloom. Many of the good practices highlighted in this study are outlined within the RHS Sustainability Strategy, and include ways to become climate positive, biodiversity positive, eliminate the use of single-use plastic, move towards zero waste to landfill and become water neutral. Positive steps for people include enabling more people to enjoy gardening and wildlife, and ensure that sustainability is embedded in horticultural training and learning for staff, contractors and the local community/volunteers.

Another key factor of good practice highlighted by the RHS is to influence positive change within the horticultural industry. For councils, this can be achieved by purchasing through sustainable supply chains, and sourcing contractors that have green credentials and can deliver on climate and nature positive outcomes, alongside the good practices outlined in this study.

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2. Introduction

Workington Town Council have commissioned Cumbria Wildlife Trust to prepare tender documents for their floral displays contract within the town of Workington.

Workington has a tradition of high-quality bedding and hanging basket displays around the town, but the council has had the same scheme for many years and is keen for a refresh.

Background

Historically the same tender document has been used and the same scheme has been implemented in Workington for several years; which has included colourful hanging baskets, mangers and barrier troughs.

The council wishes to revitalise the floral displays to make them environmentally friendly and more sustainable.

The displays are usually installed around June and removed in Sept/Oct, so in place for a relatively short period of time.

The council is keen to attract pollinators throughout the year and feels that the costs associated with the displays could be better used for an annual programme.

Brief

Key requirements/considerations:

- Pollinator-friendly planting.
- Increase biodiversity within the town.
- Sustainable planting.
- Peat-free.
- Environmentally friendly.
- Community involvement – we would very much like the option for community involvement with the displays. Groups may wish to be responsible for a certain area/ward of the town which we would welcome.
- Watering/maintenance – this would need to be carried out by the contractor/community group.

Research/case studies:

- What do other councils do?
- How are their floral displays managed and maintained?
- Best practices to follow.

3. Research undertaken

Research was undertaken in the format of desk-based studies that included:

- Web-based research.
- Direct emailing of a wide range of local councils and city councils.
- Direct emailing of conservation agencies including Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts (RSWT), Buglife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, etc.
- Direct emailing of horticultural suppliers and services.
- Follow-up phone calls and RSWT's intranet -21 'Wildnet'.
- A pool of 21 individuals from different organisations were emailed directly, and information was sourced from 18 research items (downloadable PDFs) and 69 different weblinks.

Case studies were also sourced to share insight into:

- What do other councils do?
- How are their floral displays managed and maintained?
- Best practice to follow.

Limitations

There is an increasing movement by local councils towards peat-free and sustainable management of their local green spaces, with many councils already managing grasslands sites with 'No mow May' and 'Let it bloom June' and 'cut and collect' of arisings when managing meadows, leaving wildlife margins for nature and planting peat-free perennial flower beds and borders.

Most of these schemes have already been incorporated into local plans and strategies as part of a council's commitment to tackling climate change and improving the town's biodiversity and natural habitats. However, web-based research suggests that many local councils have only recently made the switch towards sustainable planting schemes for planters, hanging baskets and town centre floral displays, with many towns and cities starting to adopt changes as recently as this year (2024).

Drilling down for further information and case studies that fulfilled all of the criteria of the brief proved quite tricky. In addition to this, it was incredibly difficult contacting councillors, contractors and council maintenance teams who were responsible specifically for floral displays. Few contact details were available on websites, and often those who were contacted either didn't return calls or emails, or were on holiday. However, despite this, a surprising amount of information has been gathered.

4. Findings

Through desk-based research, information was sourced from 24 different local authority/borough council/parish council sites in terms of what they have done to enable pollinator-friendly planting, increasing biodiversity, sustainable planting, peat-free, environmentally friendly, community involvement, and watering systems.

Most councils took a holistic approach in terms of addressing climate and biodiversity targets, supporting pollinators and moving towards a sustainable approach; therefore few addressed any key considerations in isolation. Some councils such Henley Town Council declared a 'Nature Emergency: Commitment to Protect and Restore Biodiversity' with '*actions that include the establishment of a nature advisory group, the formulation of ecology management plans, the attainment of bee-friendly status'*.

In June 2024, the government launched its 'Climate Change and Sustainability Strategy'. To mitigate climate change, the government has committed to net zero emissions by 2050. This commitment is combined with interim ambitions to reduce direct public sector emissions by 50% by 2032 and 75% by 2037. In addition, the UK's 30 by 30 target aims to reverse the decline of nature, create new habitats, ensure people have access to green spaces, and help build the Nature Recovery Network. The Government states 'to *meet these objectives requires an immediate response*.'

In parallel to this, through its 'Climate and Nature Strategy 2024-2027', Cumberland Council aims to protect, restore, and increase biodiversity, reduce emissions and transition to a green economy, and make Cumbria carbon neutral by 2037.

Good practice

Best practice in terms of any council's horticultural activity, supports the delivery of national and local strategies. Good practice within the horticultural industry is best described by RHS and 'Britain in Bloom', who are leading the way in terms of influencing gardeners, communities and councils; alongside everyone involved in the industry.

In 2021, the RHS published its Sustainability Strategy with its aim to be Net Positive for Nature and People by 2030 with a statement by RHS President Keith Weed:

"We are all now painfully aware that we face a climate and biodiversity crisis, and that every effort counts. Through good practices, planting choices and avoiding products and materials that reduce biodiversity, gardeners, and the horticultural industry can help us: deliver on the United Nations' sustainable development goals, and deliver the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan."

The RHS aims to work together with gardeners to tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis. Within its strategy, the RHS set out ambitious actions within all its operations to achieve good practice, setting the standard for those involved in horticultural practices to follow. Table 1 overleaf has been adapted from the 'RHS Strategy to become Net Positive for Nature and People by 2030.' and highlights actions that can be taken to achieve this.

Table 1: Best Practice in Horticultural Activity to Deliver Climate, Nature and People Positive Outcomes. (Adapted from RHS Strategy, 2021)

ACTION	OUTCOME	METHOD
Become climate positive	Capture and reduce more greenhouse gas emissions than is emitted, through changes in horticultural practices.	Become 100% peat-free Electrify outdoor machinery
Become biodiversity positive	Reverse habitat destruction in greenspaces; protect and improve conditions for pollinators and other wildlife and enhancing and conserving plant diversity for the future.	Promote biodiversity in gardens and greenspaces. Spread the biodiversity-positive gardening message widely to a diverse audience
Circular plastic	Eliminate all single-use plastic; encourage reduced use of all plastics; ensure that all packaging used is 100% reusable, recyclable, or compostable in operations and encourage all of these in gardening practices with others	Use less plastic: Reduce and cut down plastic use. Use better plastic: Switch to recycled, recyclable or compostable products in our operations. Use no plastic: Choose, wherever possible, alternative materials, such as paper, glass or aluminium
Zero waste to landfill	All waste produced is reduced, reused, recycled, composted, or sent to energy recovery in all operations and encourage all of these in gardening practices with contractors.	Complete waste audit of horticultural practices to inform waste strategy Review and improve green-waste recycling sites Reduce, reuse, recycle, repair or recover waste wherever possible.
Become water neutral	To use less, capture, reuse and recycle water in operations and to encourage water-neutral gardening practices.	Reduce water use, by eliminating leaks and wastage, switching from mains to rains supply and implement water use efficiency measures, along with reusing and recycling water. Replenish supplies by harvesting and storing as much water as possible
Net positive for people	Enable more people to enjoy the benefits of gardening and wildlife	Exploring the development of new urban gardening community hubs, with a focus on delivering environmental and wellbeing benefits
Develop and embed sustainable horticulture within education, research and training	increasing the skills, knowledge and confidence of staff, contractors and young people and adults to grow sustainably	Ensuring sustainability is embedded within all horticultural training and learning. Develop and offer new, accessible training in sustainable horticulture from beginner to professional level, and offer sustainability training to staff and volunteers Increase sustainability message through all communications and both internally and externally

Britain in Bloom echoes these good practices with a call for 'In Bloom' groups to '*minimise their use of plastic and choose alternative materials when possible. Reuse items like plant pots and trays and consider the sustainability and environmental impact of actions. Groups should involve the local community and ask for their support and should consider efforts to preserve and maintain wildlife areas and natural habitats. They can also educate the community about these areas and encourage them to visit.'*

Councils have a big sway in terms of buying power. Choosing sustainable suppliers and contractors that have ethical and green credentials not only commits to local and national climate and nature targets, it also influences and forces positive change within the horticultural industry.

In terms of the key requirements for considerations for the tender document, the following research was undertaken for the different headings outlined in the brief. Both case examples and more in-depth case studies have been used to highlight best practice and learning by different councils across the UK.

Peat-free

This includes not only using peat-free compost as a growing and planting medium, but also sourcing plants that have been grown in a peat-free medium from suppliers.

Why go peat-free? Peat is a non-renewable resource. Peatland habitats are the largest land carbon store, of global significance for biodiversity, and reduce flood risks. Damaging peat bogs results in carbon dioxide being released into the air, an estimated 23 million tonnes of it every year from UK peatlands alone.

Case example: Calderdale Council has stopped using peat products in its gardening work, to protect fragile peatland habitats and contribute to net zero carbon targets. Cllr Scott Patient, says:

"Using peat-free alternatives when buying plants or compost for our gardens is a simple but important switch we can all make to cut carbon whilst protecting the environment and our peatlands. There are lots of sustainable alternatives available.

We always want to lead by example and have reached our goal to end the use of products containing peat in all our gardening activities. The Council grows and cares for thousands of plants across Calderdale each year, so by carefully choosing the compost we use, we can make a big impact on the environment. As part of Calderdale's Climate Action Plan, we also want to raise awareness of the importance of protecting our precious peatlands. When in a good condition, these incredible areas store huge amounts of carbon, reduce our flood risk and support biodiversity."
https://news.calderdale.gov.uk/pulling-the-plug-on-peat-products/
08/07/2024 by Calderdale Council

Case example: Congleton Town Council has committed to using peat-free compost for all their work. This includes:

- 260 town centre hanging baskets lined with moss and then filled with plants.
- 30 solid baskets filled with peat-free compost, then filled with plants.
- 30 kids tubs equipment supplied by Congleton Town Council for the school children to plant up the town centre pots.
- 30 large planters & 180 troughs filled with peat-free compost, then filled with plants.

https://www.congleton-tc.gov.uk/sustainable-outdoor-environment/

Case example: Stroud District Council manages the floral displays and planters through their contractor Ubico. Mike Wardle, Public Spaces Officer says

'we use compost that is created from our own green waste, and no peat is used across the district. Any hedge cuttings are chipped, any risings we collect (these are very minimal and are only from the bowling green, all other risings are left in across the district) and any leaves collected from the park are all mixed together and turned quarterly. This creates a compost which we then use instead of peat.'

Case example: Matlock Town Council owns and maintains planters that are on display throughout the town. Traditionally these had been filled with bedding plants, but in March this year, as part of their commitment to the environment and biodiversity, the council took the decision to plant locally sourced, sustainable, pollinator-friendly plants instead. These plants were planted in peat-free compost and grown in peat-free compost wherever possible.
Data from *Horticulture Weekly* magazine, Jan 2024, suggest that 82 out of 186 councils have gone peat-free. Some of the councils (27) that state that they have gone completely peat-free are listed on the council Climate Action Scorecards 2023 and in the Appendix (page 27). The scorecard states:
'Criteria met if the council has stopped using peat in soils in all landscaping and horticulture such as parks and council properties. A commitment that the council has stopped using peat compost or soil on their website or biodiversity strategy will be sufficient to meet the criteria'

At Cumbria Wildlife Trust's wildflower nursery in Houghton, Carlisle, over 150,000 healthy plants are grown from seed using Melcourt's 'Sylvagrow' peat-free compost. Further information about the alternatives to peat can be found on the RHS website here.

Pollinator-friendly

Pollinator-friendly planting schemes include a range of flowering plants that provide high-quality nectar and pollen provision for a range of pollinating insects, such as bumblebees, solitary bees, butterflies, moths, hoverflies, flies, beetles and wasps.

To make flower displays more pollinator-friendly, Belper Town Council recommends,

P*rioritise sourcing free plants grown in peat-free compost. Some herbicides and pesticides used on plants in nurseries can be directly harmful or toxic to pollinators, sourcing plants from sustainable and environmentally –friendly suppliers will help avoid this. Choose varieties with abundant nectar and pollen to support pollinators, instead of relying on solely bright, long-lasting bedding plants that often lack insect-attracting qualities; this reduces your carbon footprint by avoiding peat-based growing mediums and actively helps pollinating insects by providing them with a food source.*

Recommended flower types include single, recurved, and reflexed flower heads. A variety of flower colours and shapes e.g. saucer, bell, cluster, tubular, and star to attract a wide range of pollinators including moths.

Research by T.T. Makino and S. Sakai, 2007 BES Journal suggests that bees show preferences for plantings with larger floral displays, but eventually bees were able to discriminate between rewarding and less-rewarding plants of equal display size by associating a plant's location with its reward size. Plants with many flowers can achieve higher visitation rates from pollinators in two ways: (i) by attracting inexperienced pollinators with large displays; and (ii) by encouraging experienced pollinators to return with the promise of greater rewards i.e. with plants that have high nectar or pollen yields.

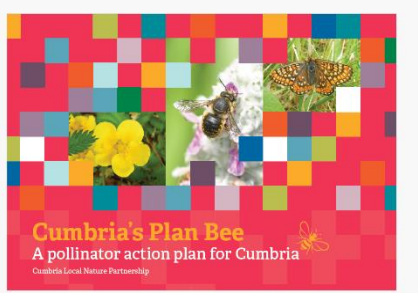
Research published in Environmental Entomology Journal in 2022 suggests that native wildflowers are more attractive to pollinators than non-native plants, and in addition to this, they are also essential food plants e.g. bird's-foot trefoil, is the larval food plant of the common blue butterfly.

Planting lists and other recommendation for pollinator friendly planting can be found in the Appendix on page 23.

Why pollinator-friendly? Research by Buglife has shown that half of the UK's 27 bumblebee species are in decline, and three have already gone extinct. Two-thirds of the UK's moths are in long-term decline, 71% of the UK's butterflies are in long-term decline, 38% of bee and hoverfly species in Europe are in decline, while only 12% are increasing. The UK's flying insect population has declined by nearly 60% in less than 20 years. The average distribution of pollinating insects in the UK has decreased by 18% since 1970.

Pollinators are essential for the reproduction of plants and the survival of Earth's ecosystems. They are responsible for pollinating about 75% of crop plants, including many fruits and vegetables. Without pollinators, we would not have many of the foods and medicines we use today

Pollinator-friendly case examples



Counties including Cumbria ('Cumbria's Plan Bee'), Kent, West Sussex, Cornwall and Somerset have set out specific targets and ambitions to address the decline of pollinators within localised Pollinator Action Plans and Strategies, calling on local councils and others to take action. Adoption of pollinator-friendly strategies by local councils, in conjunction with commitments to climate change, sustainability and biodiversity was clearly evident by councils in the research undertaken by this study. The majority of the 24 councils researched as part of this study pledged to take action for pollinators across their greenspaces. For example:

'Westmorland and Furness Council will support our communities to establish and improve our networks of pollinator habitats across council land and wider. Using funding from the Local Authority Environment Fund, the council has committed £95,000 to the Planting for Pollinator partnership.

Chichester City Council highlighted *''In line with City Council policy, from 2024 Chichester city are introducing more bee friendly and sustainable planting to aid carbon capture, improve air quality and encourage pollinators in to the city. '*

Some councils cited actions more specifically for their town centre floral displays:

'Keighley Town Council is responsible for the main floral displays within the town. In 2022, the Town Council assumed responsibility for the floral tubs and barrier baskets previously looked after by Bradford MDC and the tubs are now planted twice each year with both a Summer and Winter/Spring display.

In addition to planters and barrier baskets, we also arrange for many local businesses to have hanging baskets on building frontages. We install and maintain these hanging baskets on behalf of the businesses for a small annual fee. As part of our planting regime, we include flowers and plants that are bee and pollinator friendly as part of our commitment to make Keighley a bee friendly town.'
https://www.keighley.gov.uk/our-services/town-centre-floral-displays/

In 2021, The York BID (Business Improvement District) filled York city centre with over 200 planters, as part of its 'Buzz About York' campaign, aiming to help pollinators. Filled exclusively with bee-friendly plants their aim was to provide insects 'rest stops' so they can travel safely from green space to green space. It included temporary city centre meadows and bug hotels fashioned like York landmarks.

https://yorkmix.com/york-created-britains-biggest-buzz-this-summer-and-now-other-cities-want-to-follow-our-lead/

In 2024, as part of 'Buzz about York' the council is trailling sustainable planting in flower beds that provide nectar for pollinators such as bees and butterflies. The plants are also long-lasting, which reduces waste and CO2 emissions. This also fits with York's campaign to make the most of York's green infrastructure to improve health and wellbeing, support nature recovery, and increase biodiversity to make the most of our green infrastructure. A list of perennials used can be found in the Appendix on page 23.

One of the #buzzaboutyork planters 2021

Additional case studies can be found here:
https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2023/12/B-Lines-Case-Study-Dawley-Park-in-Telford-Shropshire-06.pdf

Community involvement

Involving communities and volunteers in planting floral displays has many benefits. Community gardening can help people feel a sense of ownership and shared learning about the public spaces they use. The mental health benefits that gardening brings has been well documented, and community gardeners have reported higher levels of resilience and optimism than people who don't garden.

Community involvement also allows individuals to take action about the things they care about, such as helping improve the environment by making it greener and cleaner, and by attracting wildlife, or by simply helping to keep the local area they live in attractive and cared for, which in turn helps boost the economy. Community gardening also provides a space and opportunity for sharing ideas and teaching tolerance, patience and humility.

Many of the councils researched advertise for volunteers and community members to play their part and care for unloved spaces, asking them to help maintain them for all to enjoy. Most of the councils do this by advertising on their website for take up of different volunteer gardening activities schemes. Other councils have look to embed their community ethos in the way they manage and maintain their floral displays.

Case example: Norwich City Council have a commitment to investigate whether the money they spend can have more positive outcomes than simply the purchase. This ethos is at the heart of their award-winning floral displays around the city. The flowers and plants in both the civic displays and in many community planting projects around the city are grown by students on supported learning courses at City College Norwich in a partnership spanning 20 years and producing over 20,000 plants a year. Many of the students also take on work placements with local firms, learning to plant and maintain the plants they have grown.

In 2019 Norwich City Council: '*Have taken our next step and broadened this partnership to include other community groups and residents. In previous years the scheme purchased plug plants for the students to grow to maturity, but they felt we could do more with the help of other green fingered people. The scheme began to also purchase seeds, which are 30% cheaper than plugs and engaged local residents to take these home to their own greenhouses to nurture until they reach a stage the students can take them back. Ten groups are already supporting the students this way with regular meet-ups, seed swaps, advice sessions and they've even diversified into growing vegetables for other local projects from seeds donated to them. This has meant that they can grow more, reduce costs and link groups together on a shared project where we work in partnership. All the plants which are not used in civic plantings are freely available to other volunteer community planting projects in parks and neighbourhoods to help bring colour and pleasure to the whole city.*'

https://www.councils.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Social-Value-Growing-Communities-Norwich-City-Council.pdf

Case example: Tenterden Town Council recently won the gold award in the Villages, Towns and Cities category of the Wilder Kent Awards. The council was involved with setting up Tenterden Wildlife along with a team of volunteers who work closely with the council to increase biodiversity across the town. Gemma Hayes from Tenderden Town Council says:

'At the moment it's very much work in progress so not too much to say with regards to actual planting. We rain water harvest from our buildings into various IBC's and use this for hanging baskets, beds and 3 tiered towers dotted about over the town. The towers and baskets have water chambers built inside them so require less frequent watering (sometimes once a week is too much!) so work really well.

We are gradually changing plants over to more pollinator friendly ones, but have found that these don't necessarily give the colour that the public and councillors would like, so it is certainly a gradual thing using a combination of colour and native wildflowers/pollinator friendly flowers and as and when the budget allows! This winter we are hoping to install some solitary bee posts in the large central flower beds which look a bit snazzy but will hopefully help to spread our wildlife loving message across the town. '

https://www.tenterden-wildlife.org/

Sustainable planting practices

Buying locally sourced peat-free and pesticide-free plants, or growing them in-house can save significant amounts of greenhouse gas emissions.

Perennial plants are plants that live more than two years. Perennials are more sustainable than annual bedding plants because they store more carbon in the soil and stems. With perennials, the above-ground portion of the plant dies back in freezing weather but re-grows from the base and rootstock the following spring to bloom again, making them a more carbon-friendly option. Layered planting with perennials that flower at different times can provide year-round structure and colour. Many councils such as Stroud Town Council are moving away from traditional bedding plants and incorporating perennial plants within their floral displays.

Case example: Crewe Town Council is responsible for the extensive floral displays throughout the town, including their planting and maintenance.

These displays include:

- pole planters
- raised planters
- hanging baskets
- railing troughs
- displays on the Market Hall

The displays are planned almost a year in advance, when schemes are designed and plants ordered. Looking after the displays takes time and effort and the Crewe Town Rangers are also involved by adopting unloved flower beds and maintaining new planters.

They are currently working to develop an improved winter scheme to brighten up the town centre during the winter months. They aim to use sustainable planting schemes wherever possible to provide interest year after year with shrubs, perennial flowers and herbs – which also help to keep bee and insect populations happy!

They invest (where possible) in self-watering systems, however, during hot spells even those displays require additional visits.

https://www.crewetowncouncil.gov.uk/service/floral-displays/

Case example: Congleton Town Council sources bedding plants locally to reduce their carbon footprint. A wide number of city, town and local councils stated that they are now planting perennials to reduce replanting and associated waste. *'We will send zero waste to landfill – all our waste will be reduced, reused, recycled, composted or sent to energy recovery.'*

A list of peat-free suppliers can be found in the Appendix on Page 23

Environmentally friendly

Eliminating the use of single-use plastic, looking at ways to provide circular waste and water neutrality are all ways in which towns and cities can become more environmentally friendly. The RHS composts and re-uses green waste in all its gardens.

Case example: Whilst Stroud District Council's hanging baskets and floral displays are managed by their contractor Ubico, all of the compost used is created from the council's own green waste, and no peat is used across the district. Mike Wardell,Public Spaces Officer says

'Any hedge cuttings are chipped, any risings we collect (these are very minimal and are only from the bowling green, all other risings are left in across the district) and any leaves collected from the park are all mixed together and turned quarterly. This creates a compost which we then use instead of peat.'

Biodiversity across the town

UK cities and towns are expanding and increasingly our green spaces are diminishing. How councils manage their green spaces and floral planting displays offers a unique opportunity for pollinator conservation. The RHS have researched the role that urban gardens play in terms of pollinator provision, which can equally apply to urban town council planting schemes.

RHS research suggests that the diversity of pollinators in urban areas is often higher than that in surrounding rural areas, where nectar resources have declined due to changes in land use. Floral displays and town planting schemes are often actively managed to provide diverse displays of flowering plants, which in turn can support diverse communities of pollinators.

Different displays within an area peaking at complementary times, results in a relatively stable overall supply through the year at a landscape scale. The more floral displays/planting schemes a pollinator can visit, the more stable its nectar supply across time.

Similarly, having a wider variety of plants in a garden or across a town helps to smooth the peaks and troughs in nectar supply through the year, by helping to ensure there is something flowering in every month. Further information on the role of gardens for pollinators in urban setting is found here: https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/articles/urban-nectar-provision

Case example: Regents Place is a 13-acre mixed use campus located on Euston Road. Prior to the improvement works, the campus was primarily concrete with little greenery or opportunity for people to sit and socialise. Therefore, there was a need to revitalise the public realms, enhancing nature and providing places for people to interact whilst engaging with nature.

The project team consulted with local communities to create a shared vision for the project. The vision had two key aims: to transform the existing hardstanding public realms into areas with lush greenery, and to provide inclusive spaces that could be enjoyed by all.

The first phase was delivered in conjunction with the redevelopment of part of the site, and focused on providing additional ground planters and seating areas around the building.

The second phase involved introducing new ground planters across the campus and implementing one of London's largest living walls. Biotecture worked with Townshend on this project to create the 350 sqm BioPanel, which is composed of around 22,000 plants and incorporates 50 bug hotels.

Following the completion of the project ecologists measured the associated biodiversity net gain and ecosystem services uplift. The project has enabled a 91% improvement in biodiversity net gain due to the change from developed land to green spaces. A variety of different flowering plants, shrubs and grasses were chosen, providing increased food sources for invertebrates and then in turn for birds and bats. There have also been significant improvements in the provision of ecosystem services as habitat provision and connectivity have increased. The scores for human wellbeing have improved through sensory and thermal comfort means as the project has provided more shaded areas and opportunities to connect with nature.
https://www.britishland.com/news/increasing-biodiversity-across-our-regents-place-campus/

Cambridge City Council has taken action to re-think how it uses its green spaces across the city, in a joint up approach. https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/9761/parks-and-open-spaces-biodiversity-toolkit.pdf

Watering

Within this study, some of the councils researched had suffered extreme drought conditions and extreme variations in climate. To combat this, these councils have adopted self-watering planters, sourced from horticultural suppliers such as Amberol. The self-watering containers have a built-in water reservoir below the soil with a series of capillaries to 'suck up' the water, which is then evenly dispersed via an expander pad. Because the water is stored under the soil, it doesn't evaporate in warmer conditions. This meant that even in the hottest, driest season, hanging baskets and containers need only be watered once or twice a week, saving on both water and maintenance. Other councils such as Cambourne decided to make alternative choices.

Case example: Cambourne Town Council. 2023 presented unique challenges due to the hosepipe ban implemented in Cornwall. The hosepipe ban aims to allow for our reservoir water levels to recover, which is particularly important in summer.

With this in mind, Cambourne were determined to ensure that Camborne's 2023 floral display remained visually appealing, while supporting the conservation of their precious water resources. After careful consideration, Camborne Town Council opted to introduce modifications to 2023's floral display in order to minimise water wastage. One significant change entailed the exclusion of window boxes and baskets from the flower arrangements, with the council choosing to provide businesses with 1mx1m floral planters as an alternative.

The 1mx1m floral planters were selected for their unique design, incorporating internal reservoirs that can collect and store rainwater. This innovative feature significantly reduces the need for frequent watering, and in some cases eliminates it altogether, especially during periods of abundant rainfall. In contrast, window boxes and baskets lack this reservoir system and typically require watering 2-3 times a week, even when it rains. By temporarily removing them from the year's display, they were taking proactive measures to reduce an unnecessary stress on Cornwall's already strained water resources.

While they understood that this change disappointed those enjoyed the traditional displays of previous years, they were confident sustainable alternatives will remain aesthetically captivating. This goal was to strike a balance between providing a vibrant summer display and responsibly managing the water resources for the long-term benefit of our community. This decision encompassed the council's commitment to the Climate's Action Plan by reducing unnecessary water waste.

Cambourne Council firmly believe that by making these adjustments, they are demonstrating their commitment to environmental responsibility and actively contributing to the sustainable future of their town. Together, they want to ensure that Camborne remains an attractive and sustainable town, even in the face of adversity through this beautiful, but water-responsible, floral display they look forward to enjoying alongside their community.

https://camborne-tc.gov.uk/camborne-floral-display-2023/

Case Example: Faversham Town Council exercised a word of warning. One Councillor that was involved on a practical level stated:

'I can give some feedback as I instigated the project on the practical level. We grew the plants that went in the planters but issues arose with the plants chosen. They outgrew the hanging baskets and required more watering than the council were prepared to do. It ended with local people complaining about the dead weeds decorating the streets!

Choose plants carefully, make sure irrigation is in place and a slow release fertiliser is added.'

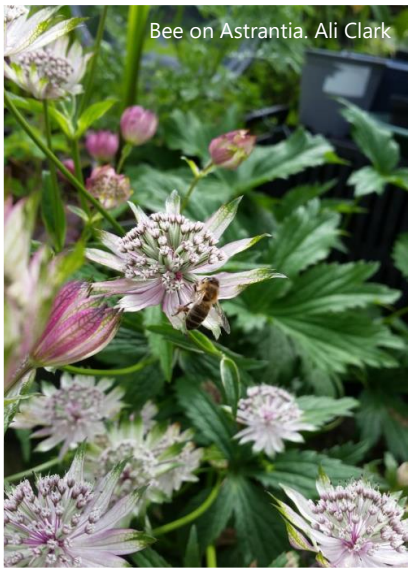
5. Case studies

A series of four case studies can be found on the following pages (pages 17-19).

Case Study: Belper Town Council - Beautiful Belper, Nature-friendly and Peat-free

Belper Town Council has announced that *'…by summer 2026 Belper and Milford will have beautiful floral displays, gardens and spaces all year round. Wildlife-rich and peat-free, local people will enjoy them and be proud of them, visitors will enjoy them, and they will be recognised by Britain in Bloom and by local awards.'*

Stating that UK wildlife is in crisis, Belper Town Council want to make sure that their flower displays help nature. Their plan by summer 2026 is that the Town Council will only use plants grown without peat and which provide food and shelter for wildlife in the hanging baskets, flower beds and planters they look after. They order plants over 6 months in advance, so they have highlighted to the public that they may not see much difference in 2024 but will see more change in 2025.


Bee on Astrantia. Ali Clark

In 2023, Belper Town Council bought over 13,000 bedding plants grown in compost containing peat, which provide little or nothing for wildlife. As all of the hanging baskets along the main streets contain peat and bedding plants, they realised that they couldn't simply change this overnight as plants were already ordered for summer 2024. They also had concerns that plants growing in peat-free compost may be more challenging to look after, especially in hanging baskets. Getting the right plant in the right place to grow well and look good will take time and they will try different approaches. They state that '*we think a gradual approach will work best, and three years is a challenging but realistic target.'*

This year (2024) Belper Town Council is working closely with Belper in Bloom and Milford in Bloom and will show the judges how they are moving forward. They aim to encourage and recognise local gardeners, community groups and businesses to help nature and fight climate change through their new 'Beautiful, Nature-Friendly and Peat-Free Gardening Awards'.

The Town Council aims to find suppliers of good peat-free plants and experiment with some peat-free hanging baskets. They aim to have more perennial plants in planters, which may need quite different care to thrive. They plan for their skilled and enthusiastic outdoor team to get any support and training they need for this change. Belper Town Council state that they will order half of the plants for winter 2024/25 and summer 2025 to be peat-free and better for wildlife. The council suggest that still beautiful, the floral displays may look different, with more natural colours and a wider range of shapes and sizes.

Going forward Belper Town Council will order only peat-free and wildlife-friendly plants for winter 2025/26 and summer 2026. So that by 2026 '*100% of our lovely flower beds, hanging baskets and planters will be peat-free and nature-friendly.'* Through different awards schemes their vision *'is that all around town, private, commercial and public spaces will be gardened the Belper way – beautiful, wildlife-friendly and peat-free!'* https://www.belpertowncouncil.gov.uk/beautiful-nature-friendly-peat-free/

Case Study: Worthing Borough Council Sustainable Planting Scheme

In October 2023, Worthing Borough Council announced that '*Flowerbeds in Worthing are to receive colourful, environmentally-friendly displays all year round thanks to their new sustainable planting scheme',* and that, ' *Worthing Borough Council has long delivered a beautiful array of flowers in its parks, town centre and neighbourhoods by planting twice a year to bring colour and joy to those spaces.'*

As part of a new sustainable approach, they are moving away from using solely traditional seasonal bedding towards a more balanced mix of permanent planting, which will be supported by seasonal bedding. This new approach, has been co-designed with their craft gardeners at Highdown Gardens, to provide a longer-lasting, colourful display and support pollinating insects throughout the year.

The change has been introduced as part of their ambition to be more sustainable. It will not only allow them to avoid wastefully replacing tired plants each season, but also save on watering due to the new, hardy species on show. In the town centre, floral displays will include nandina domestica and heuchera, whilst on the seafront they will feature seaside daisy, sea thrift, red valerian and sea holly.

One of the finished sustainable flowerbeds in Worthing

The council's parks team are keen to encourage and support those in the community who have been sponsoring and maintaining flowerbeds across the town to continue the more sustainable approach.

Cllr Vicki Wells, Worthing's cabinet member for the environment, said:

"The design of Worthing's traditional floral displays must adapt to the changing climate. The water-dependent plant varieties of the past required lots of attention and resources only to be composted at the end of each season.

"Rethinking the types of plants used means we will better support nature and use less valuable water. We can deliver beautiful flower beds while being more environmentally-friendly and sustainable - I can't wait to see the results."

Cllr Sophie Cox, Worthing's cabinet member for climate emergency, said:

"We still want to see a beautiful display of flowers across our towns, parks and neighbourhoods, but it's important that we adapt to the ever-growing changes to our climate.

"These new planting schemes mean we will reduce the waste of costly annuals that last a single season and instead we'll use plants that need less water and support our pollinators."

This sustainable planting scheme forms part of Worthing Councils work to make a cleaner, greener and safer Worthing. https://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/news/archive/pr23-145.html

Case Study: Plantscape, Stratford in Bloom and Stratford BID (watering)

In 2023 Plantscape, Stratford in Bloom and Stratford BID, working alongside Stratford-upon-Avon council, collaborated in creating beautiful floral displays across Stratford-Upon-Avon's town centre. The partnership has come together to develop the best floral displays the community has seen yet. After initially answering Stratford in Bloom's tender and then Stratford BID's tender for this project, Plantscape were awarded the contracts.

Planting scheme in Stratford, as part of Stratford in Bloom 2023

Plantscape not only met but exceeded expectations of their requirements, through the inclusion of pollinator-friendly plants with a peat-free growing medium in Plantscape's famous 7-day watering planters. Creating a floral display designed to boost local biodiversity whilst maintain the town's aesthetic and beauty.

The collaboration between all the stakeholders contributed to maximising not only the aesthetics of the displays, making them enjoyable for the community and tourists alike, but also the opportunity to enhance pollinator habitats. Each organisation brought in diverse expertise, opportunities and new ideas that allowed the community to enjoy imaginative and magical displays.

Plantscape have delivered a range of planting schemes that support sustainability and biodiversity, and are peat-free. Further details of how they manage and maintain the planting schemes, alongside watering, as part of their service can be found in the short video clip here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDf-Ae3Eks4 .

Their website also provides a range of case studies including 'Beverly in Bloom – Hanging Baskets' https://plantscapeuk.com/case-studies/.

Case Study: Britain in Bloom finalist St Ives plant friendships that last (community)

'Friendship' was the theme of 2024's Britain in Bloom community gardening competition, which celebrates 60 years of bringing people together to make their local areas flourish.

UK finalists of the 'Large Town' category, St. Ives In Bloom (Cambridgeshire), decided to install and maintain planters supplied by Amberol across their community. In keeping with the 60th anniversary theme, they also delivered a friendship-themed project within their local community.

St. Ives In Bloom engaged in a joint friendship project with the Norris Museum and Spring Common Academy, a nearby school for children with special educational needs.
The students designed and planted bedding flowers in the stone planters which are placed outside the local history museum, bringing a burst of colour for visitors (and bees!) to enjoy.

St. Ives In Bloom group is run by a dedicated team of volunteers that set schedules for maintaining and planters across their areas to keep the flowers looking vibrant as the seasons come and go. As their volunteers do the watering, they needed to keep the task to a minimum, and opted for the self-watering planter that are based on Amberol's unique Aquafeed™ self-watering system. This contains a series of capillary action wicks that 'suck' water up from a reservoir onto a dispersal mat, which then distributes the water evenly across the compost, keeping it moist at all times. Self-watering planters are a real asset to community gardening and In Bloom groups, as they only need to be watered once or twice a week. This saves time, water, and money.


Large Amphora Precinct Planters in St. Ives' town centre

Hattie from St. Ives In Bloom group stated that '*this feature is very important to us – we would not be able to have so many floral displays in town without it.*'

Additional case studies from Amberol can be found here:
https://amberol.co.uk/community/post/2015-07-13/amberol-helps-shrewsbury-become-the-town-of-flowers

6. Conclusion

Of the 24 councils researched as part of this study, all were adapting their approach of managing and maintaining their greenspaces and floral displays to become more environmentally friendly.

Many councils had embedded local and national climate and biodiversity strategies and targets within their operations, whilst others looked to take a more general climate and nature positive approach, with floral displays and planters becoming peat-free and/or attracting pollinators.

The majority of the councils researched were transitioning to becoming peat-free, and most had only started making changes in becoming more sustainable within the last few years. This is largely in response to the government's ban on the sale of peat (by the end of 2024), and a phased reduction in the use of peat in professional horticulture, with a complete ban on peat in horticulture by 2030. This in turn has led to more options being available in terms of sourcing both peat-free compost and plants. Some councils such as Stroud Town Council are leading the way by using their own recycled wood chippings and green waste to make their own compost.

Some councils had seen unprecedented changes in weather with extended periods of drought. This had led them to look at different approaches to watering i.e. using irrigation systems, or not even considering the use of hanging baskets, and instead opting for planters with self-contained irrigations systems and tanks. Other councils encouraged community or retail-outlet adoption schemes to maintain and water planters or baskets across the town or city. The incorporation of drought tolerant plants, and the use of perennials were being trialled by many councils in their transition to more the sustainable management and maintenance of floral displays.

Involving local communities through various initiatives and campaigns such as 'A Buzz about York', and 'In Bloom' competitions were highlighted as ways to engage with local schools, groups, and residents. Community schemes also included the adoption of hanging baskets and planters and gardening awards schemes, which encouraged residents to not only take an interest but also garden in a more environmentally friendly way. This in turn helped increase biodiversity across cities and towns, and share learning. More direct and ambitious approaches where taken by councils such as Norwich City Council who engaged with Norwich City College students to grow seed and engage directly in planting activities across their city.

Horticultural companies such as Amberol and Plantscape provide a full range of services to help councils meet their objectives of becoming climate and nature positive, and many councils view using their services as a failsafe approach. By making sustainable purchase choices such as sourcing pesticide and peat-free plants from sustainable suppliers, other councils are helping to positively influence the horticultural industry.

Collectively, the approaches and practices of the different councils researched reflect many of the best practices outlined by the RHS in their 2021 Sustainability Strategy. Incorporating some or all of these strategies and best practices within any tender document would significantly help to make Workington Town Council's floral displays more environmentally-friendly and sustainable.

7. Recommendations

The RHS is leading the way in terms of identifying best practice in its horticultural activities to become both climate positive and nature positive. In terms of managing and maintaining floral displays in Workington Town Centre in a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable way, the following recommendations are made in reference to the RHS commitments, and other good practices highlighted by councils in this study.

- Pledge and transition towards becoming peat-free in all horticultural practices i.e. using peat-free compost and sourcing peat-free plants within a set timescale.

- Improve conditions for pollinators and other wildlife by sourcing pesticide/herbicide-free plants. Use a variety of single flower species that are high in nectar and pollen provision and known to attract different pollinators, including night flying moths. Pledge commitment to local strategies such as 'Cumbria Plan Bee' to highlight the action that you are taking.

- Create more permanent year-round displays using a range of plants to include pollinator-friendly perennials and bulbs.

- Pledge towards and eliminate all single-use plastic; encourage reduced use of all plastics throughout the town and look to source contractors who are pledging to do the same.

- Look to reduce, recycle or compost waste and look to source contractors who are pledging to do the same.

- Investigate options to use less, capture, reuse and recycle water in operations and to encourage water-neutral practices, such as the use of irrigation systems.

- Encourage people to become involved i.e. through planter adoption schemes, In-Bloom and volunteering groups. Explore the development of new urban gardening community hubs, with a focus on delivering environmental and wellbeing benefits in line with any proposed RHS schemes.

- Look at ways to embed sustainability in horticultural training and learning for staff, contractors and the local community/volunteers.

- Influence positive change within the horticultural industry by purchasing through sustainable supply chains.

8. Appendix

List of councils/linked webpages

https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKCUMBERLAND/bulletins/39a4b09
https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/love-plymouth-parks
https://www.northamptontowncouncil.gov.uk/sustainable-planter
https://cdn.buglife.org.uk/2019/12/EA-pollinators-project-case-study_Market-Rasen-pollinators-demonstation-site_v1-31-March-2019.pdf
https://www.york.gov.uk/BuzzAboutYork
B-Lines-Case-Study-Dawley-Park-in-Telford-Shropshire-06.pdf (buglife.org.uk)
https://plantscapeuk.com/case-studies/plantscape-stratford-in-bloom-and-stratford-bid-join-forces/
https://amberol.co.uk/community/post/2015-07-13/amberol-helps-shrewsbury-become-the-town-of-flowers
https://news.wrexham.gov.uk/football-fans-and-pollinators-will-get-a-kick-out-of-wrexhams-latest-massive-artwork/
https://www.wirral.gov.uk/environmental-problems/street-care-and-cleaning/pollinators-and-wildflower-sites
https://www.keighley.gov.uk/our-services/town-centre-floral-displays/
https://www.belpertowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2024/05/Beautiful-Belper-Nature-Friendly-and-Peat-Free-Plan.pdf
https://www.quarndon-pc.gov.uk/quarndon-in-bloom
https://chichestercity.gov.uk/floral-displays-and-planting/
https://matlock.gov.uk/planters-in-town/
https://www.york.gov.uk/news/article/1448/council-launches-buzz-about-york
https://chichestercity.gov.uk/floral-displays-and-planting/
https://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/news/archive/pr23-145.html
https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/greeneripswich
https://www.knutsfordtowncouncil.gov.uk/natureactionplan
https://www.henleytowncouncil.gov.uk/town-news/henley-town-council-declares-nature-emergency-commitment-to-protect-and-restore-biodiversity
https://www.westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk/your-environment/climate-change-and-natural-environment#:~:text=The%20Planting%20for%20Pollinators%20project,decline%20of%20pollinators%20in%20Cumbria.
https://plantscapeuk.com/case-studies/brunel-planters/
https://www.bathinbloom.org/horticultural-achievement/horticultural-practice

Other contacts

enquiries@matlock.gov.uk
GI4G@cornwall.gov.uk
leisure@fareham.gov.uk
info@kentwildlife.org.uk
Sara Booth-Card sbcard@wildlifetrusts.org
Rachel Richards rachel.richards@buglife.org.uk
ninaagnew@rhs.org.uk
chair@parksmanagement.org.uk (Lancashire)

enquiries@matlock.gov.uk
cllrjulie.wozniczka@belpertowncouncil.gov.uk ; admin@belpertowncouncil.gov.uk
Councillor.SPatient@calderdale.gov.uk
Mike wardell community.services@stroud.gov.uk
info@congleton-tc.gov.uk
Lee.Lowis@carlisle.gov.uk
opportunities@ipswich.gov.uk https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/greeneripswich
enquiries@adur-worthing.gov.uk https://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/news/archive/pr23-145.html
enquiries@henleytowncouncil.gov.uk https://www.henleytowncouncil.gov.uk/town-news/henley-town-council-declares-nature-emergency-commitment-to-protect-and-restore-biodiversity
enquiries@bumblebeeconservation.org

Peat free compost choices
Peat-free compost choices / RHS Gardening

Peat free suppliers
https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/peat/peat-free-nurseries
https://peatfreeplants.org.uk/
https://www.quinkywholesaleplants.co.uk/
https://www.seiontnurseries.com/
https://www.kernock.co.uk/
https://boultons.co.uk/peat-free-nurseries-boultons/

Pollinator plant choices
Buzz About York: Perennial plants, or simply perennials, are plants that live more than two years. The term is often used to differentiate a plant from shorter-lived species, which grow for one season and then die with the onset of winter.

With perennials, the above-ground portion of the plant dies back in freezing weather but re-grows from the base and rootstock the following spring to bloom again, making them a more carbon-friendly option.

This Spring we will be planting:

- Allium hollandicum 'Purple Sensation'
- Anemone x hybrida 'Honorine Robert'
- Antirrhinum mix (Crimson and Pink)
- Centaurea montana
- Erigeron karvinskianus
- Euonymus fortunei 'Silver Queen'
- Geranium macrorrhizum 'Ingwersen's Variety'
- Hebe 'Little Leaves'
- Lamium maculatum
- Origanum vulgare
- Rosa 'Scented Carpet' or 'Flower Carpet Coral'
- Spiraea 'Goldflame' or 'Firelight'
- Viburnum opulus 'Compactum'

Plantscape pollinator friendly range includes some of the following plants:

- Bidens
- Salvia Mystic Spires
- Chaenostoma Bacopa
- Lavender Bandera

Get Your Garden Buzzing! Pollinator friendly planting recommendations for hanging baskets and planters

- Bird's-foot trefoil
- Trailing lobelia
- Bacopa (single varieties e.g. Chaenostoma cordatum 'Snowflake')
- Nasturtium (single varieties e.g. Tropaeolum majus)
- Marigold (single varieties e.g. Calendula officinalis, which is easy to grow from seed) Miniature dahlias (single varieties e.g. Mignon series)
- Sweet William
- Poached egg plant
- Fuchsia (single varieties)
- Meadow or wood crane's-bill (or other hardy geraniums)
- Dwarf lavender
- Echium blue bedder
- Salvias (e.g. Salvia nemorosa 'Caradonna')
- Dwarf scabious columbardia
- Viper's bugloss (bees love this one! Can grow quite tall – 75cm)
- Wallflower (especially Erysimum 'Bowles's Mauve')
- Dwarf catmints
- Mexican fleabane (Erigeron karvinskianus)
- Sedums (e.g. Hylotelephium spectabile 'Ice plant')
- Aubretia (an early spring plant)
- Violas
- Larkspur
- Native bulbs (e.g. bluebell, daffodil and snake's-head fritillary)

Award schemes

https://pollinators.ie/communities/tidytowns-pollinator-award/top-10-tips-to-enter-pollinator-award/

RHS recommendations

https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/plants-for-pollinators

Other pollinator friendly planting suggestions:

https://www.rosybee.com/research-study
https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/grow-plants/wildlife-friendly-hanging-basket/
https://www.egclub.co.uk/wildlife-friendly-hanging-basket
https://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/activity/how-to-plant-a-pollinator-friendly-hanging-basket/
https://www.eynsfordparishcouncil.org.uk/post

make_your_own_wildlife_friendly_hanging_basket33.html
Plants-for-bees.pdf (buglife.org.uk)
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/lifesci/goulsonlab/resources/flowers

2023 Councils scorecards:

"Criteria met if the council has stopped using peat in soils in all landscaping and horticulture such as parks and council properties. A commitment that the council has stopped using peat compost or soil on their website or biodiversity strategy will be sufficient to meet the criteria."

The full list of councils scoring full marks for this are:

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Blaby District Council

Broadland District Council

Cambridge City Council

Cheltenham Borough Council

Chorley Council

Dartford Borough Council

Derbyshire Dales District Council

Eastleigh Borough Council

East Staffordshire Borough Council

Folkestone and Hythe District Council

Gedling Borough Council

Hertsmere Borough Council

Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council

Lancaster City Council

Lewes District Council

Lichfield District Council

Maidstone Borough Council

Melton Borough Council

Mole Valley District Council

Newcastle-Under-Lyme District Council

New Forest District Council

North Devon Council

North Hertfordshire District Council

North West Leicestershire District Council

Oxford City Council

Pendle Borough Council

Rugby Borough Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council

South Norfolk District Council

Spelthorne Borough Council

St Albans City and District Council

Stroud District Council

Surrey Heath Borough Council

Tandridge District Council

Watford Borough Council

West Suffolk Council

Worcester City Council