



NORTON COMMON

GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN, 2020 - 2025

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

Produced by:



On behalf of:

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL



CONTENTS

Contents	1
1. Introduction.....	2
2. Background.....	3
3. Review of Progress.....	5
4. Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) 2020-2025	6
5. Community Engagement and Plan Production Process	8
6. Stakeholder Feedback.....	10

1. INTRODUCTION

A new five year Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) is being produced for the Norton Common. This briefing document provides an overview of how the GAP will be produced, and sets out how stakeholders can contribute to shaping the plan.

GAPs are essentially map-based management plans that provide focus and direction for the running and improvement of open spaces. They provide a clear, logical process to determine the activities that should take place over a stated period of time to achieve the objectives for the site.

The GAP is being produced by the Countryside Management Service (CMS), part of Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside and Rights of Way Service, on behalf of and in partnership with North Hertfordshire District Council. The completed document will inform the management actions to be undertaken over the next five years, commencing in April 2019.

Engaging communities is integral to the production of GAPs, to ensure that stakeholders are fully aware of and able to interact with the plan production process. This briefing document initiates and supports this community engagement.

The engagement period will run from 23rd August to 27th September 2019. A further engagement period in January 2020 will provide an opportunity to assess the draft version of the GAP. Please use the contact details in Section 6 to comment on the aspirations for the site.

This document has been broken down into easy to read sections:

Section 2 provides an overview of the site and location map.

Section 3 reviews recent management of the site.

Section 4 contains the core objectives for the Norton Common GAP.

Section 5 summarises the public engagement methodology, setting out how and when stakeholders can contribute to the plan.

2. BACKGROUND

Brief

Norton Common is a public open space in Letchworth Garden City, located to the north of the town centre, central grid reference is TL218333. The site is approximately 29 hectares in size and incorporates a variety of habitats including woodland, grassland, and marsh. A number of leisure facilities are available on site including bowling greens, tennis courts, lido, skate park and 'Jump Wood'. The Pix brook flows through the site, culverted in places.

Ownership and Management

The site is owned by North Herts District Council (HNDC) and is managed by the Grounds Team, with support from Friends of Norton Common and Countryside Management Service (CMS), part of Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside and Rights of Way Service. Management is guided by a five year 'Greenspace Action Plan' (GAP) produced by CMS, in consultation with stakeholders, with objectives for delivering improvements to biodiversity and heritage, access, and community engagement. The 2020 to 2025 GAP will be the fourth successive five year plan produced by CMS to inform management of the site.

Designation and Awards

Norton Common is declared as a Local Nature Reserve, and is a designated Local Wildlife Site (LWS) in recognition of the local biodiversity significance of habitats on site. The site has been awarded Green Flag status for a number of years, in recognition of achieving a quality benchmark for park and greenspace management. Green Flag is judged annually.

Heritage

Common grazing rights were exercised on Norton Common from at least the 1700s up to the late 1800s, during which time the site was composed predominately of dry and marshy grassland. Historic ridge and furrow features can be seen on site today and are a remnant of medieval arable cultivation. From the late 1800s the site was managed for game and grazing ceased, resulting in succession of much of the site to secondary woodland and scrub.

In 1904, the land and freehold were acquired by the First Garden City Ltd. and in 1907 the site was recognised as an area of beauty which should be preserved and made accessible for the new residents. In 1922, Letchworth Urban District Council took over the site, installing access routes and leisure facilities whilst committing to retaining the natural characteristics.

Biodiversity

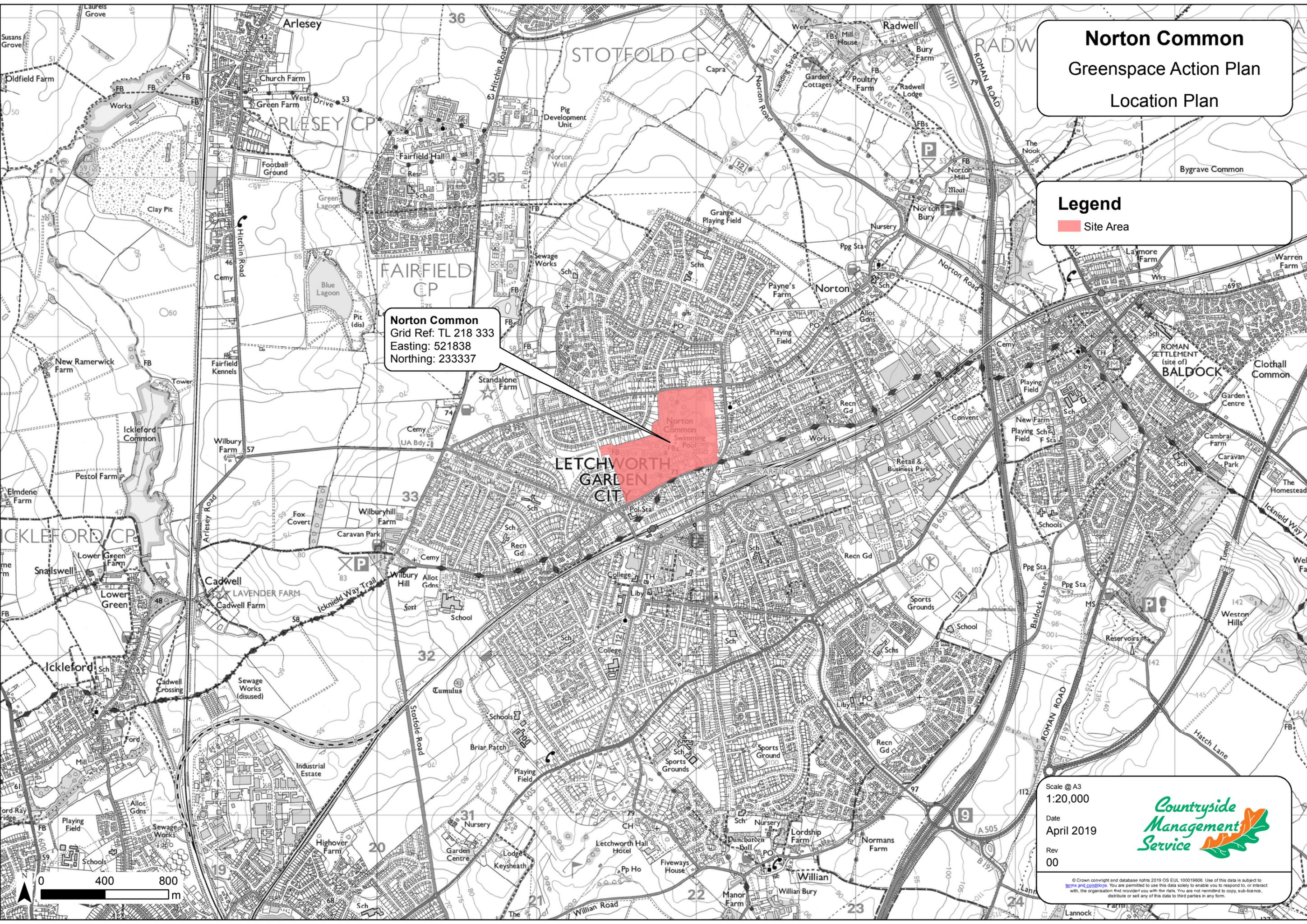
The site contains a rare example of boulder clay marsh, a sensitive habitat which supports a diversity of wildflowers. Unimproved grassland on ridge and furrow is also species rich. Wildlife includes 'black' squirrel (an unusual form of Grey squirrel), pipistrelle and noctule bat, and Muntjac deer. A formal tree avenue of horse chestnut and lime bisects the site. The Pix brook has been extensively modified for flood risk, affecting the water regime on site.

Friends of Norton Common monitor biodiversity of the site and provide management support for more sensitive habitats, including tree planting to diverse secondary woodland and control of competitive plants encroaching on rare marsh habitat. Marsh and unimproved grassland are cut and lifted annually by the Grounds Team. Wildlife value of the Pix brook has been enhanced by reducing shading and re-profiling and seeding some stream banks.

Norton Common Greenspace Action Plan Location Plan

Legend
■ Site Area

Norton Common
Grid Ref: TL 218 333
Easting: 521838
Northing: 233337



Scale @ A3
1:20,000
Date
April 2019
Rev
00

© Crown copyright and database rights 2019 OS EUL 100019606. Use of this data is subject to the [OS Terms and Conditions](#). You are permitted to use this data solely to enable you to respond to, or interact with, the organisation that provided you with the data. You are not permitted to copy, sub-licence, distribute or sell any of this data to third parties in any form.

3. REVIEW OF PROGRESS

Access and Interpretation

In the last ten years, interpretation of the site has been improved by publishing site leaflets and installing welcome panels at site entrances which provide a map and information on the biodiversity of the site. The welcome panels are now showing signs of wear and a refresh of interpretation may help to increase visitor engagement in the conservation value of the site.

Path improvement works over the course of the 2015 – 2020 GAP have helped to improve all year access throughout the site. Leisure facilities are located in the south east corner of Norton Common, in close proximity to site car parks. Surfaced pedestrian paths leading directly to the leisure facilities are available from the south and east site entrances. However, visitors accessing Norton Common on foot or bicycle from north or west site entrances are not offered a surfaced shortcut to leisure facilities, being obliged to follow surfaced paths leading to south or east entrances if they wish to avoid crossing grassland (which can be muddy in winter). This may limit use of leisure facilities by local residents who lack access to a vehicle, or encourage greater vehicle use by residents to the north and west of the site. A solution could be to install a short section of surfaced path heading west from the leisure facilities and connecting at the central avenue to the east-west surfaced ride.

Biodiversity and Heritage

Over the course of previous GAPs conservation of rare marsh habitat has been achieved by pushing back woodland edges and controlling scrub and competitive plant species. Appropriate management of the marsh, and unimproved grassland on ridge and furrow, is achieved through an annual cut and lift which replicates traditional meadow management.

A current threat to marsh habitat is the encroachment of competitive plant species, particularly in the small marsh, and the maintenance of appropriate water levels.

The future plan should aim to monitor water levels in the marsh, and continue to manage marsh and grassland to promote diversity and abundance of native wildflower species. For example, green hay exchange from the central to small marsh could be employed to increase the cover of characteristic marsh flora, such as orchids, valerian, and water mint.

Woodland has been managed under previous GAPs to increase structural diversity, such as opening woodland glades and scalloped edges, which create opportunities for tree planting and natural regeneration. The future plan should aim to manage woodland to promote native diversity, monitor for disease (such as ash dieback), and control non-native invasive species.

Horse chestnuts along the central avenue are in decline due to age and poor health. A sympathetic restoration strategy for the avenue should be developed in the future plan.

Community Engagement

The Friends of Norton Common provide management support for the site, in particular to encourage biodiversity, and are active in guiding development of new management plans. The site is well used by local residents for formal and informal recreation and leisure facilities cater to a range of ages. Coordinated community events include North Herts Road Runners, Forest School and Nature Tots. The site may be suitable for low impact commercial events such as cinema and outdoor theatre events in the summer, potentially attracting a wider demography of visitors to the site. Any such event will need to consider the ridge and furrow.

4. GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN (GAP) 2020-2025

The Norton Common GAP 2020-25 will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by officers of North Hertfordshire County Council and members of the public, and will act as a guide to the work of volunteers. The plan will be largely map based, with sequential, annual management maps to show the actions planned for each year. The resulting change will be represented on the map for the following year. The document will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains effective and relevant.

The plan will be costed and potential funding sources identified. Once the final GAP is agreed, external funding will be sought to enable the plan to be delivered.

The aim and objectives of the GAP will be as follows:

Aims

Conserve and enhance the biodiversity and heritage of the site, in particular boulder clay marsh, species rich grassland and ridge and furrow, and maintain the site as an accessible, welcoming, and enjoyable place to visit offering a variety of recreational and leisure options.

Objectives

A. A welcoming place

- A1 Refresh interpretation provision
- A2 Improve access to Leisure Facilities from west and north entrances
- A3 Assess impact and benefits of low level lighting on the main avenue
- A4 Reassess toilet provision (in particular for Nature Tots and Forest Schools)
- A5 Reassess installation of BMX trails in Jump Wood

B. Healthy, safe and secure

- B1 Promote appropriate recreational use of the site to a wide diversity of user groups
- B2 Carry out reactive tree works to address safety issues

C. Well maintained and clean

- C1 Remove graffiti
- C2 Maintain site infrastructure
- C3 Regularly empty bins and litter pick

D. Sustainability

- D1 Ensure ongoing management costs are financially sustainable
- D2 Carry out management according to environmental best practice
- D3 Identify and apply to external funding sources for capital works where available

E. Conservation and Heritage

- E1 Manage species rich grassland to promote diversity and abundance of wildflowers
- E2 Manage marsh habitat to maintain habitat extent and control competitive species
- E3 Monitor water levels in the central marsh
- E4 Manage woodland to promote regeneration and tree health, and control non-native species
- E5 Employ traditional management approaches wherever possible
- E6 Develop a restoration plan for the central tree avenue
- E7 Zone mowing regimes for access, recreation and wildlife buffer strips

F. Community involvement

- F1 Support the Friends of Norton Common
- F2 Support Forest School and Nature Tots
- F3 Provide an opportunity for stakeholders, including local residents and community groups, to influence the new GAP through a structured engagement process.
- F4 Encourage a wide range of ages and social demography of park users

G. Marketing

- G1 CMS and / or Friends of Norton Common to lead periodic guided walks
- G2 Promote the site as a valuable community resource using varied media platforms

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLAN PRODUCTION PROCESS

Effective community engagement is at the centre of successful management plans. The value of a GAP is maximised when it incorporates and balances the aspirations of stakeholders and interest groups.

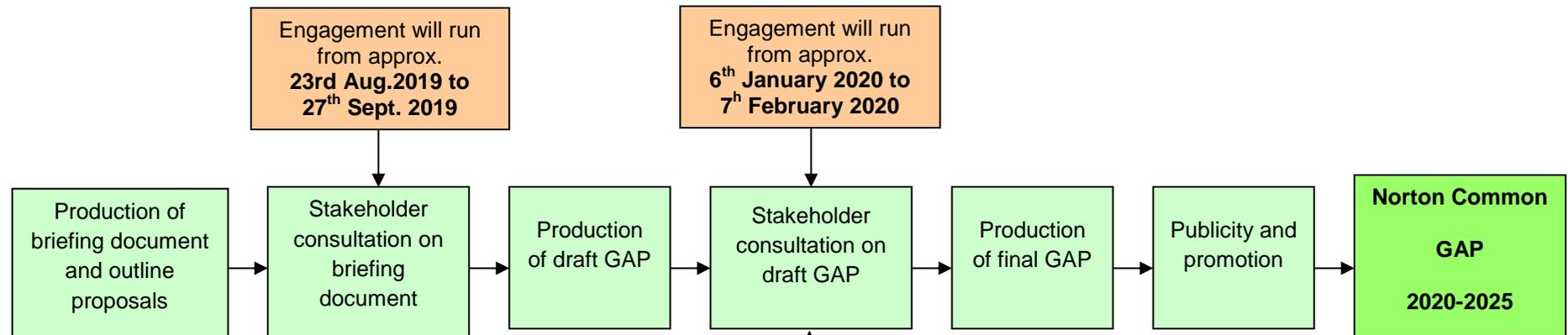
In order to provide all interested stakeholders and groups with the opportunity to feed into the production of the new GAP, we have adopted a structured two-stage approach to community engagement.

- For the first stage (this briefing document), stakeholders and site users will be invited to make comment on the core aspirations in Section 4; it is hoped that any further aspirations and/or issues will be identified through this information gathering process. This first stage of community engagement will run between Friday 23rd August and Friday 27th September **2019**.
- For the second stage, stakeholders and site users will be invited to read through and make comment on the draft GAP, which will include the detailed proposals and actions. This stage is intended to run in between approximately **Monday 6th January** and **Friday 7th February 2020**. To support this stage, we will be holding a guided walk and engagement session for any users or interested groups that may wish to discuss the proposals or a particular aspect in more detail. The arrangements for this event will be confirmed and advertised nearer the time.

Following the second stage exercise, the final document will be produced, published and the actions will commence.

Please be aware that we will not respond individually to comments received through the public engagements; instead, we will produce a summary of comments, noting any amendments made to the plan as a result. This engagement response document will be published online alongside the briefing document, draft plan and final plan. We will retain contact details only for the purpose of keeping respondents informed about the plan development process.

The following diagram shows the Greenspace Action Plan production process:



Stakeholders	
Friends of Norton Common	Grange Community Social Club
North Hertfordshire District Council Officers	Environment Agency
North Hertfordshire District Council Cllrs	Ramblers Association
Hertfordshire County Council Officers	Cycle Herts
Hertfordshire County Council Cllrs and Portfolio Holder	Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation
Hertfordshire Ecology	Hertfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club
Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre	Upper Bedford Ouse and Catchment Partnership
Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust	Local Community
Historic Environment Record	
Historic England	

6. STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We are keen to receive feedback from you on our proposals for the Norton Common Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) 2020-2025.

Please return your comments to Gemma Worswick at the contact details below by **Friday 27th September** at the latest.

E-mail: gemma.worswick@hertfordshire.gov.uk

Tel: (01992) 555710

Address: Hertfordshire County Council, County Hall,

Pegs Lane, Hertford,

SG13 8DN

Postal Point CHG001