

A “CAMDEN NATURE CORRIDOR” FROM HAMPSTEAD HEATH INTO CENTRAL CAMDEN

The Camden Nature Corridor is a plan to improve and extend nature-rich green spaces in Camden and to bring their benefits to the doorsteps of residents in nature-poor areas. It will do this by improving five of Camden’s Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and linking them through new “green infrastructure” in planned housing development. This will create a corridor of accessible woodland, hedgerow and meadow, extending the rich biodiversity of Hampstead Heath into residential areas to the south. More nature in urban neighbourhoods will improve our well-being and quality of life and, at the same time, make our local biodiversity richer and more resilient to urban growth and climate change. Working across Camden’s pressing demands for both better housing and nature restoration, this is a unique opportunity to deliver on both.

The Corridor

Five of Camden’s protected SINCs lie in a line from Hampstead Heath into Kentish Town, as shown below, each under different management. The largest is Hampstead Heath itself, central London’s most biodiversity-rich open space. Stretching below the southeast corner of the Heath along railway edges are a series of smaller SINCs. These include the longstanding, community-managed Mortimer Terrace Nature Reserve, the Kentish Town City Farm, Britain’s oldest urban farm, the Gospel Oak Rail Sidings meadows and woodland managed by Network Rail, and Talacre Town Green, an important local recreational space that has recently earned SINC status with its development of meadow and hedgerow habitats. Several of these SINCs already provide nature education activities for local residents and schools.

In between, and bordering, these SINCs lie central Camden’s three priority sites for housing and business development, Murphy’s Yard, Regis Road and West Kentish Town Estate. Approximately 2000 new homes are planned for these sites in the coming decade. Because of their proximity to these nature reserves, these developments could threaten nature in these SINCs and further degrade nature experiences for existing and new residents. Or they could do the opposite, by creating a modest strip of protected natural habitat along railsides and across developments that would enhance and better connect SINCs. Recent studies have shown that distinctive wildlife on Hampstead Heath, including hedgehogs, woodpeckers, thrushes, butterflies and frogs, can colonize the SINCs to the South, if these habitats can be protected and improved.



Linking SINCS through new protected habitat would do just this. Wildlife increasing in SINC habitats would visit existing and new gardens and green spaces around, enhancing nature experiences on our doorsteps. With their improved and extended natural habitats, our SINCs would be even better placed to deliver nature education services to local families and schools.

An urgent need.

UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, its animals and plants have decreased by 20% since the 1970s and one in six British species are at risk of extinction. Climate change is predicted to make this worse. Nature in urban areas is particularly threatened. In cities, nature-rich green spaces support “ecosystem services” like clean water and air, and reduce the impact of increasing flooding, pollution and extreme temperatures. Restoring nature also supports well-being. Science has shown that time spent in nature-rich green spaces, and even the sound of birdsong, can improve mental health.

A unique opportunity.

The planned development across Murphy’s Yard, Regis Road and West Kentish Town Estate provides a once in a generation opportunity to restore nature in Camden. New development gives us the best opportunity to set aside critical space for nature. Camden has already identified SINCS as “stepping stones” for developing the Nature Recovery Networks prioritized in its 2023 Biodiversity Action Plan. Linked by green infrastructure in new development, this line of SINCs can create a significant Camden nature recovery network. New residents in future housing will benefit, as will current residents in surrounding areas. Dartmouth Park, Kentish Town and Gospel Oak and Haverstock communities have all prioritized green corridors in their Neighbourhood Development Plans and Visions.

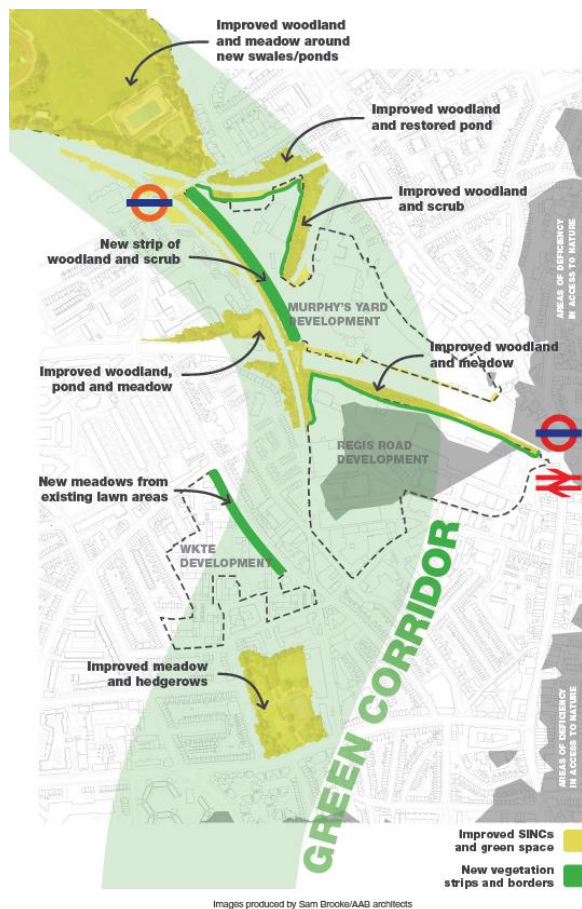
What needs to be done?

The plan for a Camden Nature Corridor has been developed by several local organizations, including the Heath & Hampstead Society, City of London, Mortimer Terrace Nature Reserve, Kentish Town City Farm, and Friends of Talacre Town Green. It has been endorsed by local Neighbourhood Forums and submitted in 2024 to the London Borough of Camden through the Local Plan process. Working with our consortium, Network Rail are also planning improvement of their railside SINC area in the proposed Corridor.

Because the full development of the Corridor will depend on the timing of development for three future Camden Site Allocations, a precise timeline cannot be given. We propose instead three activities, each of which will produce a stand-alone, nature-positive community outcome. Together, they will deliver the Camden Nature Corridor.

Improving natural habitats in SINCs

Within their existing boundaries, all five SINCs need to be improved in order to support more biodiversity and to be more resilient to surrounding future development and the effects of climate change. This means restoring degraded areas through woodland management, planting of native trees, shrubs and meadows, creating of new habitats like ponds and wetland, and controlling invasive alien plants. Managers of each SINC are developing plans for this with assistance of conservation experts. Grant funding for improvements and community engagement for maintaining nature-rich spaces will be needed and sought.



Images produced by Sam Brooks/A&A architects

Establishing appropriate green infrastructure in future development on Site Allocations

In order to protect and connect SINCs, development of Murphy's Yard, Regis Road and West Kentish Town Estate needs to incorporate modest, nature-rich spaces. Progress towards this objective has already been made. The latest Camden Local Plan draft (2024) states that development of Murphy's Yard and Regis Road Estate must "take opportunities to enhance biodiversity, with potential for the provision of vegetation buffers along the railway lines to create and improve connections for wildlife". But more needs to be done.

The figure opposite shows some of the SINC improvements we are exploring, along with potential new vegetation strips to link SINCs and buffer them from new housing. Inside developments, developers can achieve their Biodiversity Net Gain requirements by creating green infrastructure that specifically reinforces the Corridor. This could include ground level swales and ponds as part of a sustainable drainage system, green walls, hedgerows, clumps of trees or small orchards and wildflower meadows.

Linking up with other local nature initiatives

We are making links with other nature-focused community groups and organizations who are creating and improving nature-rich spaces along roadsides, in public green spaces, at schools and in private gardens. These complementary interventions will help to spread biodiversity from the Corridor. We are also engaging with groups creating nature-rich areas south of the Corridor, including the Camden Highline.

How you can be involved in the Camden Nature Corridor and its development

If you are a local organization or group supporting nature in the area of the Corridor, we would like to meet with you to discuss how we can work together, share experiences and accelerate local nature recovery. If you are an interested resident, we are keen to get your views and your support. A newsletter is being developed which will keep subscribers informed of developments and opportunities to help advance the Corridor. Not all of our SINC areas are presently open to the public, but do visit those that are - Hampstead Heath, Kentish Town City Farm and Talacre Town Green - and see for yourself how they are being managed and developed for nature enjoyment and education. And join us on future "Walk the Corridor" events to see the current landscape on which the Camden Nature Corridor is being planned.