



# Weston Hills

GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN, 2021 - 2026

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) 2021-2026 .....	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 Weston Hills.

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 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 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 2021.

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 for the briefing document will run from 4<sup>th</sup> May to 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020. A further engagement period in January 2021 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 Weston Hills 2021-2026 GAP.

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

Section 6 provides contact details for providing feedback on the Briefing Document

## **2. BACKGROUND**

---

### **Brief**

Weston Hills is a public open space located on the eastern boundary of the historic market town of Baldock. The site occupies a north-west facing chalk slope bounded by arable fields along the east margin, and residential development at the west margin, central grid reference is TL249326. The site is approximately 17 ha in area and is composed of deciduous woodland and species-rich chalk grassland with scattered and fringing scrub. The site is accessible from several pedestrian entrances around the site which lead into formal and informal paths.

### **Ownership and Management**

Weston Hills is part owned and part leased by North Herts District Council (NHDC). The site is managed by NHDC, with support from Friends of Baldock Green Spaces and Countryside Management Service (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 biodiversity and heritage, access and interpretation, and community engagement. The 2021 to 2026 GAP will build on the framework for maintaining and improving the site established by the 2016 to 2021 GAP.

### **Designations and Grants**

Weston Hills is declared as a Local Nature Reserve, and designated as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) in recognition of the importance of the site for biodiversity. Species-rich chalk grassland is entered into a ten-year Higher-Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement with Natural England, ending in 2022, which subsidises conservation grazing and scrub management. Woodland impacted by ash dieback was awarded a Tree Health grant in 2020, through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which will subsidise replanting to improve woodland diversity and resilience. Weston Hills is on the Invertebrate Site Register for scarce and localised species.

### **Heritage**

The site contains chalk workings which date back to the Romano-British period and which provided materials for the establishment of Baldock by the Knights Templar in the 1140s. Medieval field boundaries and ridge and furrow are present across woodland and grassland.

### **Biodiversity and Conservation**

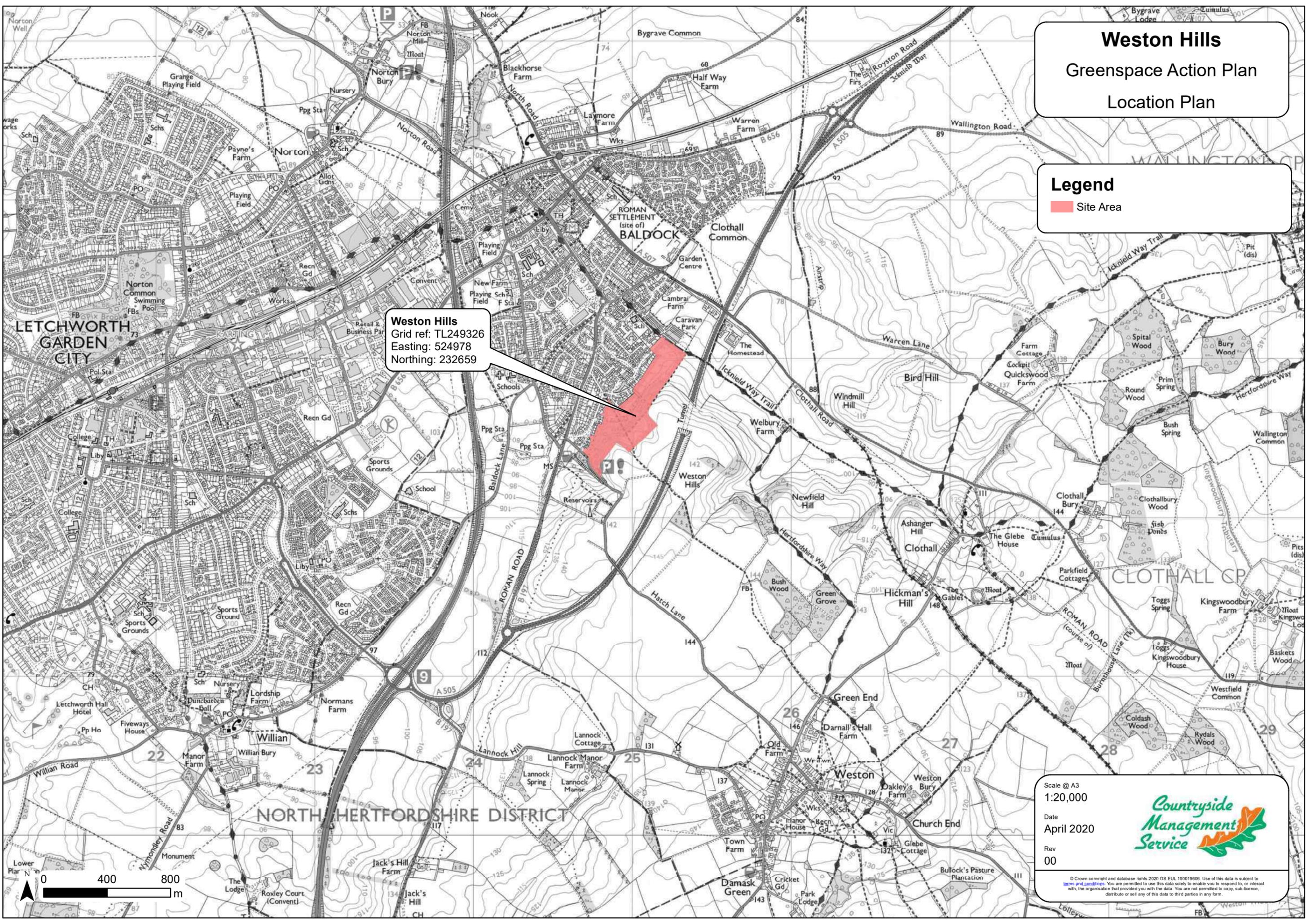
Weston Hills supports a mix of semi-natural habitats across a relatively small area, making it a diverse site for wildlife including resident and migratory birds, butterflies, common lizard, bats, and small mammals. The southern part of the site is largely covered by ash dominated woodland which regenerated in the 1990s following storm damage to the 19<sup>th</sup> century beech plantation. Groups of mature beech survive in sheltered spots. Woodland edges are scalloped to maintain two rides, dense ash stands have been thinned to improve growing conditions. In recent years, ash dieback has heavily impacted tree health and a woodland restoration plan has been developed with the Forestry Commission. Grassland is species rich and supports an assemblage of chalk loving wildflowers, Gibbet Hill is particularly diverse. Scrub control, reduced trampling, and seasonal grazing has improved condition and extent of chalk grassland in recent years. An unfenced woodland glade is managed by annual cut and collect.

# Weston Hills Greenspace Action Plan Location Plan

### Legend

 Site Area

**Weston Hills**  
Grid ref: TL249326  
Easting: 524978  
Northing: 232659



Scale @ A3  
1:20,000

Date  
April 2020

Rev  
00



© Crown copyright and database rights 2020 OS EUL 100019606. Use of this data is subject to 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**

The nature of the site, located on a steep slope with sensitive floral communities and grazing stock, means it is not suitable for formalised recreation or multi-user access. Horse riding and motor bikes are prohibited, and surfaced paths run east to west (along flat ground) connecting Hatch Lane carpark to entrances on Woodland Way, Ivel Way and Limekiln Lane. RADAR key gate provides mobility vehicle access into the northern grassland which has gentle slope and relatively dry ground. RADAR key gates also provide access to the surfaced paths. Benches are located at resting points in woodland and grassland. Picnic tables are situated near to the carpark, although this area has become overgrown in recent years. Informal paths up through woodland and towards Gibbet Hill are steep and can be muddy in winter. Gibbet Hill is shut-up from mid-July to September to allow sheep to graze the whole site undisturbed. In June, sheep are confined to the north slope, so visitors can view orchids close-up on the south slope.

Interpretation panels are located around the site, providing history and wildlife information.

Access for vehicles to deliver management is available at Woodland Way, Hatch Lane and Ivel Way. Due to the limited availability of surfaced paths, and the steep gradient of the site, habitat management is limited to hand tools and smaller vehicles such as a tractor and trailer.

#### **Biodiversity and Heritage**

Much of the woodland and grassland management which has taken place over the course of previous GAPs has been guided by requirements of grants administered by Natural England and the Forestry Commission, to improve habitat condition and management sustainability.

Reintroduction of seasonal grazing to species-rich chalk grassland in Gibbet Hill and the Northern Grassland has been delivered through HLS which funded capital works to install stock proof fencing and a continuous water supply. Local graziers supply traditional breed longhorn cattle to the Northern Grassland and sheep to Gibbet Hill. Reduction of scrub cover to extend the area of species-rich grassland, rotational coppice of retained scrub habitat, maintenance of gazing infrastructure, and daily welfare checks for grazing animals is largely delivered by local volunteers from the Friends of Baldock Green Spaces. The woodland (or 'orchid') glade is managed by annual cut and collect as grazing infrastructure is not installed.

Prior woodland management includes a 25% thin of dense ash stands, funded by the English Woodland Grant Scheme, and rotational coppicing along the woodland edge. Ash dieback was first observed at the site in 2012, affecting coppice regrowth, and over the next few years symptoms of the disease became evident in mature ash throughout the woodland. Management interventions ceased following the arrival of ash dieback, with the exception of a trial replanting plot to test which trees are suited to site conditions, to allow time for national guidance to be developed on managing ash dieback in woodlands. With the advice of the Forestry Commission, a strategy has now been developed to carry out a 50% thin over two years of woodland with a high component of ash, and replant with a mix of native tree species.

#### **Community Engagement**

The Friends of Baldock Green Spaces provide management support for the site, in particular to encourage biodiversity, and are active in guiding development of new plans. A 'Meet the Cows' event is held each year with the graziers to introduce site visitors to cattle and sheep. Guided walks are delivered by CMS to promote new plans and management interventions.

## **4. GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN (GAP) 2021-2026**

---

The Weston Hills GAP 2021-26 will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by officers of North Hertfordshire District 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**

Maintain a balance between protecting and enhancing the site's biodiversity value, in particular the species-rich chalk grassland and deciduous woodland, and provision of an accessible and engaging greenspace which is welcoming place to visit for gentle exercise and to enjoy nature.

### **Objectives**

#### **A. A welcoming place**

- A1 Review interpretation provision
- A2 Promote community and volunteer events using notice boards and social media
- A3 Open up overgrown picnic area and replace / restore picnic tables

#### **B. Healthy, safe and secure**

- B1 Maintain carpark surface
- B2 Carryout reactive tree work to address safety issues

#### **C. Well maintained and clean**

- C1 Maintain site infrastructure, e.g. gates, fencing, benches, steps, and surfaced paths
- C2 Maintain ease of access by managing vegetation encroaching paths and entrances

#### **D. Sustainability**

- D1 Ensure ongoing management costs are financially sustainable
- D2 Carry out management according to environmental best practice

#### **E. Conservation and Heritage**

- E1 Manage woodland to improve long-term resilience to disease and climate threats
- E2 Manage rides to connect and extend grassland and to diversify woodland margins
- E2 Manage grassland to promote wildflower diversity, including continuation of grazing
- E3 Manage scrub in and around grassland as a dynamic habitat by coppice rotation
- E4 Maintain visibility of chalk pit, near path, by control of tree and scrub encroachment

**F. Community Involvement**

- F1 Support the Friends of Baldock Green Spaces to contribute to site management
- F2 Provide an opportunity for stakeholders, including local residents and community groups, to influence the new GAP through a structured engagement process.

**G. Marketing**

- G1 CMS / Friends of Baldock Green Spaces lead guided walks / engagement events
- G2 Promote and celebrate voluntary and capital works projects that improve the site
- G3 Visitor information, such as maps and leaflets, available on a variety of 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.

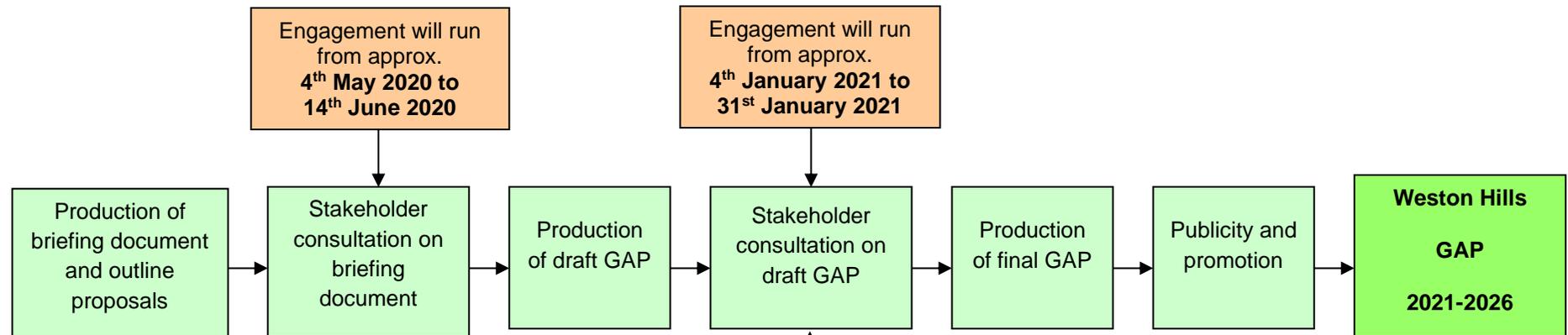
In order to provide all interested stakeholders and groups with the opportunity to feed into the production of the new GAP, we have adopted a structured two-stage approach to community engagement.

- 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 **4<sup>th</sup> May to 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020**.
- 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 4<sup>th</sup> January and Monday 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021**. 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:



<b>Stakeholders</b>	
Friends of Baldock Green Spaces	Forestry Commission
Hertfordshire County Council Portfolio Holder and local members	Hertfordshire County Council Rural Estates
North Hertfordshire District Council Officers	North District Council Portfolio Holder and local Councillors
Countryside and Rights of Way Service Officers	Local Community
Hertfordshire Environmental Records Centre	Ramblers Association
Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust	Local Access Forum
Hertfordshire Historic Environmental Record	Neighbouring Landowners
Historic England	Darnalls Hall Trust
The Environment Agency	Upper and Bedford Ouse Catchment Partnership

## **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 Weston Hills Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) 2021-2026.

Please return your comments using the contact details below by Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June at the latest.

**FAO Gemma Worswick**

Countryside Management Service  
Environment and Infrastructure Department  
County Hall  
Pegs Lane  
Hertford  
SG13 8DN

**E-mail: [gemma.worswick@hertfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:gemma.worswick@hertfordshire.gov.uk)**

**Phone: 01992555710**