



# **LEA VALLEY LINE**

## **GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN**

**2024 - 2029**

### **BRIEFING DOCUMENT**



**St Albans**  
City & District Council

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The new five-year Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) for the Lea Valley Line will run from 2024-29. 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 St. Albans City and District Council. The completed document will inform the management actions to be undertaken over the next five years, commencing in April 2024.

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 13 November 2023 to 11 December 2023. A further engagement period in early 2024 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 Lea Valley Line GAP.

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

Section 6 contains contact details to provide stakeholder feedback.

## 2. BACKGROUND

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This briefing document covers a 2.4km stretch of the Lea Valley Line, which extends along the outskirts of Harpenden to reach Leasey Bridge, following the course of the former Hatfield, Luton and Dunstable railway line. This section of the route is owned by St Albans District Council (SADC) and managed by The Council in partnership with the Countryside Management Service. Much of the Lea Valley Line also forms part of the Lea Valley Walk, an 80.5 km route following the River Lea from Luton to London.

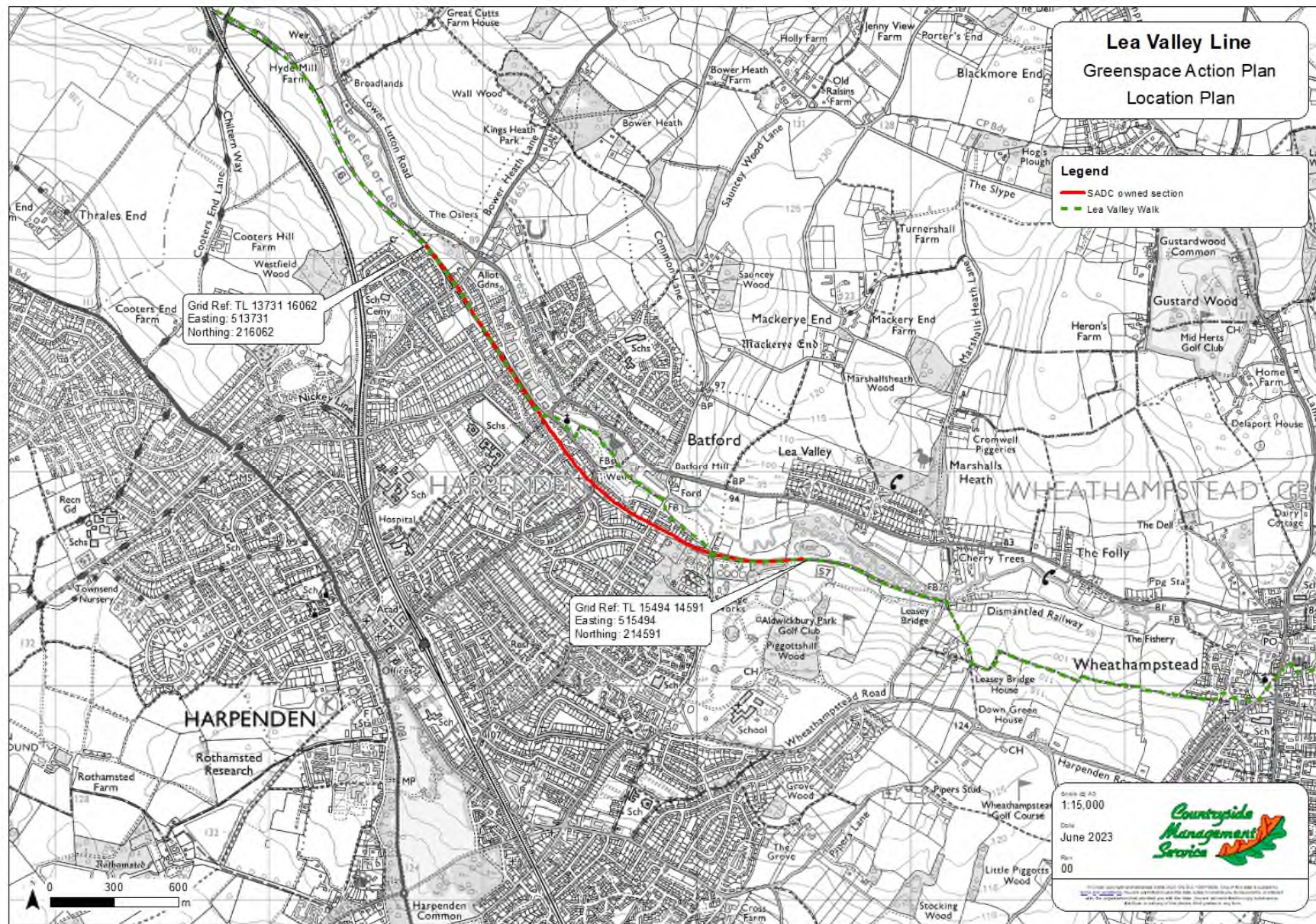
The Lea Valley Line is a multi-user route, popular with walkers and cyclists. The site extends through residential and light industrial areas, providing a safe (off-road) route for accessing the surrounding countryside and for commuting through Harpenden. In particular, the pathway is an important link in the local sustainable transport network, and forms part of Route 6 and Route 57 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network (NCN). A public footpath adjoins the site, in addition to several formal and informal entrances from the neighbouring residential areas. Although the SADC section of the route is not itself a Public Right of Way (PRoW), it provides a valuable connection to the wider PRoW network.

The former railway line, which opened in 1860, also served as a valuable transport link for the local community. Operated by the Great Northern Railway Company, the railway connected Leighton Buzzard to Welwyn Garden City. Harpenden East train station provided the town with access to London, via Hatfield. The railway was primarily used to transport watercress from the River Lea to London, and for straw plait workers to commute to and from the hat factories of Luton and St Albans. Passenger services along the line were withdrawn in 1965, following which the station was demolished and housing built along 400 m of the line. At this point the present Lea Valley Line joins and extends along Hickling Way and Waverley Road, before re-joining the route of the old railway line.

The line passes on top of raised banks and through a number of deep cuttings surrounded by steep embankments. The predominant habitat type is linear secondary woodland of ash and oak, which has formed a densely shaded canopy. The route provides a continuous linear habitat corridor through the surrounding residential landscape, connecting urban greenspaces with open countryside. This

habitat corridor not only provides refuge for wildlife but can also facilitate movement between valuable habitats. Although the site itself is bordered, for the most part, by residential properties, there are several important greenspaces within the surrounding landscape. Within 1km of the route there are 14 County Wildlife Sites, with three immediately bordering the site; River Lea Pastures (41/014), Batford Springs and Meadow (41/010), and Leasey Bridge Dismantled Railway (56/046).





### **3. RECENT MANAGEMENT**

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In recent years management of the Lea Valley Line has largely been limited to reactive works to address safety issues, as and when they arise.

There is evidence that when the railway was active, the woodland which surrounds the line was actively managed by rotational coppicing with standard trees retained, creating a largely open habitat. Closure of the railway and the subsequent end of regular habitat management along the route allowed vegetation to become tall and dense, resulting in dark and shaded conditions. A number of the trees on the steep banks overhang the route, and recent management has focused on reactive tree works to address safety issues, particularly in response to ash dieback. The objectives from the previous plan focussed on increasing active vegetation and woodland management to improve the quality of the route for people and wildlife. While the works to remove diseased ash will contribute to this aim, further work is required to open up the canopy along the route and create a more varied woodland structure.

The route is generally well surfaced, with the SADC owned section having a macadam surface. The previous plan included a number of objectives to improve access points, some of which have been delivered, including formalising an access point from Riverford Close.

The new GAP will aim to build on previous work through increasing vegetation and woodland management activities and delivering signage/interpretation outlined in the previous plan which are yet to be delivered. Further improvements to access points will also be essential in order to maximise the potential of this key strategic Green Infrastructure asset.



## **4. GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN (GAP) 2024-2029**

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The Lea Valley Line GAP 2024-2029 will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by officers of St. Albans City and 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 management maps to show the actions planned along the route. 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:

### **Aim**

To promote and enhance this multi-user route for all to enjoy, providing opportunities for use as both an Active Travel and recreational route, whilst enhancing wildlife habitats.

### **Objectives**

**A. A welcoming place** – *To provide and maintain clear, welcoming public access onto, and along the route.*

- A1 Improve access to, from and along the route, linking to local greenspaces, businesses and schools, residential areas, public transport, shops and local amenities.
- A2 Install appropriate signage to, from and along the route whilst making the route more attractive.
- A3 Inform site users and the wider community about the site's heritage through effective and engaging interpretation.
- A4 Improve provision of seating and maintain seats in a consistent style.
- A5 Enhance standard of infrastructure at access points to improve accessibility on to the route.

**B. Healthy, safe and secure** – *To provide and maintain safe public access onto, and along the route.*

- B1 Ensure that the Lea Valley Line provides a safe, high-quality route for all user groups.
- B2 Undertake tree safety surveys and carry out reactive tree works to address safety issues.
- B3 Respond proactively to anti-social behaviour and misuse of the route.

**C. Well-maintained and clean** – *To provide and maintain a high-quality route for a wide range of users.*

- C1 Manage and maintain the route's surface, signage and infrastructure.
- C2 Remove fly-tipping, undertake regular litter picking, empty litter bins, and carry out small scale vegetation management.

**D. Environmental management** – *To ensure compliance with the council's environmental policies and seek sustainable activities and solutions*

- D1 Ensure ongoing maintenance costs are financially sustainable.
- D2 Secure external funding to ensure the viability of capital works.
- D3 Ensure impacts of climate change are considered in management decisions, both in terms of the effect of climate change on wildlife habitats and of carbon emissions from management operations.
- D4 Ensure all management is carried out according to environmental best practice, including on herbicide use, plant biosecurity to minimise tree disease, and sustainable woodland management practices.

**E. Biodiversity, landscape and heritage** – *To protect and enhance the biodiversity and heritage that can be found along the route*

- E1 Undertake proactive, rotational woodland/vegetation management along the route to increase rates of regeneration, open up views

across the countryside, create areas of temporary open space, and improve tree health.

- E2 Recognise the value of mature trees and provide optimum conditions for their longevity.
- E3 Remove Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) of plants, and selectively reduce introduced tree species.
- E4 Monitor tree pests and diseases, particularly ash dieback, and apply appropriate best practice in response to findings.
- E5 Recognise the value of the route as a wildlife corridor in the context of the wider area.
- E6 Conserve and enhance the on-site historical features along the route for visitor enjoyment.

**F. Community involvement** – *Develop and maintain an informed, involved and enthusiastic local community.*

- F1 Engage the local community in the development of the GAP to build understanding and support for the plan, enabling stakeholders to shape and influence the outcomes.
- F2 Enable the local community to become involved in the management of the site through structure and support, and ensure all involved operate towards achievement of the objectives of the GAP.
- F3 Work with local stakeholders to ensure integration with the wider green infrastructure network, particularly Rights of Way, the Lea Valley Walk, and National Cycle Network (NCN) routes.

**G. Marketing and communication** – *To improve awareness of the Lea Valley Line as both an Active Travel and recreational route.*

- G1 Develop and implement a promotional strategy to increase awareness and usage of the route.

## 5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLAN PRODUCTION PROCESS

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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 **13 November and 11 December 2023**.
- 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 early 2024.

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.

### 5.1 Greenspace Action Plan production process

1. Production of briefing document and outline proposals.
2. Stakeholder engagement on briefing document. Engagement will run from 13 November to 11 December 2023.

3. Production of draft GAP.
4. Stakeholder engagement on draft GAP in early 2024.
5. Production of final GAP.
6. Publicity and promotion.

## **5.2 Stakeholders**

- British Horse Society (Bridleway usage)
- Cyclists
- Harpenden and District Local History Society
- Harpenden Rural Parish Council
- Harpenden Scout Group
- Harpenden Town Council
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Hertfordshire Natural History Society
- Herts Environmental Records Centre
- Herts & Middlesex Butterfly Conservation
- Herts & Middlesex Bat Group
- Historic Environment Record
- Local Residents and Landowners
- Local Schools
- Open Spaces Society
- Ramblers Association
- RSPB Local Group
- St Albans District Council
- Sustrans



## **6. STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK**

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Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We are keen to receive feedback from you on our proposals for the Lea Valley Line Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) 2024-2029.

Please return your comments using the contact details below by Monday 11 December at the latest.

### **FAO Michael Poole**

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