

## **A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO BIODIVERSITY AND OPEN SPACES IN CROYDON**

A discussion paper by the Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley

Croydon's 127 'open spaces' defy classification. Instance: 13 Green spaces are in the ACCS, eighteen similar in character are not in ACCS. Some are substantial and 'gated'. *Green Croydon* also shows 12 recreation grounds, 9 nature reserves, 5 ponds, and smallish places with names like Haling Grove, The Ruffets, Falcon Wood Meadow, The Lawns, Trumble Gardens, Colescroft, and Ladygrove. Added to all, are the remnants of the Great North Wood which in earlier centuries would have covered most of the northern half of Croydon – Biggin Wood and Beaulieu Heights.

Alongside these many diverse and attractive places, there are throughout the borough, four much larger open spaces: South Norwood Country Park, Lloyd Park, Addington Hills, and Purley Way, each over 50 ha. Interspersed too are five golf courses: The Addington, Purley Downs, Addington Court, Croham Hurst and Coulsdon Manor – each running to over 60 ha.

Along the very southern edge of the borough, following the line of the North Downs, are eight of Croydon's very largest open spaces: Selsdon Wood (95 ha), Kings Wood (57 ha), Sanderstead to Whyteleafe Country Park (81 ha), Riddlesdown (66 ha), Kenley Common (59 ha), Kenley Airfield (63 ha), Coulsdon Common (55 ha), Farthing Downs (95 ha including Woodplace Farm Field and New Hill) and Happy Valley (101 ha).

55 of Croydon's most important open spaces alone cover 1550 hectares – prime assets making them worth perhaps billions - in a borough facing housing shortage, and on the edge of bankruptcy.

*(See Appendix Fig. 1 The list of 55 open spaces in Nature Conservation in Croydon. Ecology handbook 9 published in 1988 by the London Ecology Unit.)*

*(See Appendix Fig. 2 A map of these sites, and areas of deficiency, distinguishing those of metropolitan importance, borough importance, local importance.)*

### **TOWARD AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

Five years during which Croydon's new Local Plan was in gestation and scrutiny have seen massive expansion of house building across the borough, mostly in the form of flats, with significant change to the character of particular neighbourhoods. A number of smaller open spaces have in consequence been required by the Inspector to justify their role and purpose. Uncertainty continues because the draft plan is to be further reviewed. Although the housing design code (SPD2) has been scrapped, the scale of needed development and redevelopment remains unclear and uncertain. Concreting gardens and forecourts still goes on, and remains not least a risk to biodiversity.

The borough currently is in special measures, through long-term mismanagement by an earlier administration; which means that services not a direct statutory requirement – like open spaces – have faced reduced financial support; a situation complicated by the Council having recently taken back ground maintenance from Idverde, and by also placing accent over recent years in having the

parks foster healthy living and fitness - and further compounded by key parks staff having left the Council. Given this whole context there must be heightened uncertainty at this time about the job descriptions and roles needed for new parks staff to be appointed.

### A turbulent, troubled, decade

Whilst housing in the form of flats has been replacing larger older dwellings, especially in the leafier suburbs, a slow but perceptible decline has been occurring in long established open spaces – captured in ‘*The State of UK Public Parks (2021)*’ – and despite Covid making many such places a refuge for scores of residents eager to escape lockdown. Climate crisis is now seeing a hesitant, faltering, commitment to ‘climate resilience’ with a fresh search for ‘greening’ –expressed currently not through parks and open spaces, but along highways – “trees for streets”.

Having come a long way since the Local Health Board paid for the first of its parks almost 160 years ago – at Duppas Hill and the Addington Hills – Croydon’s 127 open spaces, make its southern suburbs among the greenest areas of Greater London; and now with the headache of maintaining it all. In calling for help from the community, the Council must now say what form greater help needs to take – money, manpower, or management. Groups sporting initials like CCV, DP, LWT, and TCV have long helped greatly with manpower. The Review Strategy needs to say more now about money and management.

### The political challenge

It may be years before Croydon returns to full solvency. It will take a lot to shift long-standing bureaucratic mindsets prevailing in council staffs. Lessons might be learned from Tyrens’ consultancy study of six major open spaces done for the Council in 2018 – including Happy Valley. It looked in great detail at their character, role, and need for external funding. It was a detailed study. It sank without trace. The Council should state candidly why such a major review of key open spaces was abandoned, and what lessons if any were learned.

For the Council now to engage with the public across 127 open spaces will be a huge hurdle; notwithstanding very many people in communities across the borough already committing time and experience sometimes over many years to running community sports activities, food banks, litter picking, and doing committee work in Residents Associations. In many minds there doubtless lurks the feeling that “we pay our rates, so it’s the Council’s job to provide and run open spaces”.

## **NEW IDEAS AND APPROACHES**

The Council’s objectives could remain as:

- . To conserve, protect, and restore biodiversity, habitats and ecology
  - . To promote public understanding of the importance of biodiversity, habitats and ecology.
- (see <https://www.Croydon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/habitat-action-plan-chalk.grasslands.pdf>).

How this is achieved requires Croydon to be custodian and guardian of ecology and biodiversity; not losing what exists, but making more of what exists; harnessing the good-will and energy of volunteers; together with co-ordination, communication, working together, working clever, integrating approaches, and discipline.

A number of ways are available to work more smartly with existing resources, to achieve more with less. Here are seven proposals that would provide such building blocks:

1. Motivate community involvement through an open spaces forum This should be explored to test whether information gathering and exchange, and communication generally, is best done via regular face to face meetings, or by newsletter, email, zoom, or website. In one or other of these settings, the Council should say why it is proving necessary or desirable to rely on voluntary action in the management of particular open spaces, when for perhaps a century or more it has not been necessary. (Both Surrey County Council and the Surrey Wildlife Trust produce useful handbooks on practical work undertaken by volunteers.)
2. Focus on ecology and supportive initiatives This must be front and centre in current concern. While the focus of several agencies in ACCS, it has not been so in Croydon. It is 40 years since the London Ecology Unit produced '*Nature Conservation in Croydon* – commissioned by the GLC for this area through its Ecology Unit. LWT subsequently undertook an Ecological Data Search of Croydon in 2005 for the campaign group I chaired when we were seeking to save Woodplace Farm Field and New Hill. An extensive data base is now maintained by LWT titled *GreenSpace Information for Greater London*; accessible online. Croydon is one of only five London boroughs, not currently a participating partner, as the attached map shows. Hillingdon too, as the second of Greater London's NNR's is also not in partnership; and Enfield also with the whole of Epping Forest!

*(See Appendix Fig. 3 A map of London Boroughs 'in partnership' with LWT able to access a database about London's natural environment.)*

3. Smarter working in the Parks Department Lack of clear vision and leadership from the top and unclear job descriptions can lead to de-motivation and low productivity. The division of roles between borough-wide ground maintenance and the skilled supervision of the parks needs further sharpening up following staff being brought in house. Job descriptions and detailed responsibilities, not least for each key post now being sought for the service, should be drawn up by people with insight into its whole functional remit. The condition of particular parks also needs scrutiny currently, redefining the role of park keepers. Greater clarity here would be a first steppingstone towards a more coherent service.
4. More emphasis on effective fundraising Given increasing pressure from good causes on businesses, Trusts and Foundations, including The Lottery, by groups across Britain; this has to be a skilled operation for Croydon, with the department requiring considerable knowledge and circumspection - given the scale and diverse nature of 127 open spaces across the whole

borough, and the rather opaque nature of quite a number of potential external funding sources.

5. Future proofing and forward planning Happy Valley is now part of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve, designated by NE in July 2019, giving scope for close co-operation between the City's rangers, and Croydon's Warden managing Happy Valley, through joint management of the NNR. The City rangers for many years have produced ten-year plans for the City Commons as well as attractive monthly newsletters for each major section - Farthing Downs, Coulsdon Common, Kenley Common, and Riddlesdown. Big commitments from which the borough could learn much. Several London boroughs are appointing climate resilience specialists to help steer planning controls to achieve net zero carbon emissions. Croydon has yet to do so, in reinforcing its 2021 Climate Crisis Commission report.
6. Raise public awareness through service diversification Our new NNR is raising expectation that the City and the borough, now with joint management responsibility, will reach out to schools and specialist groups, with scope for employing peripatetic staff with specialist educational knowledge based in one or more key sites, becoming a focus for research and study. This approach – including nature study and art – was a feature several decades ago, not least through the Tollers Design Centre adjacent to the Tollers estate; and Happy Valley had three wardens! Ten junior schools, and four senior schools are within two miles of Happy Valley and the Downs
7. Maximise free help by investigating new models of management No one system is likely to suit all 127 open spaces. One that has gained interest nationwide is in Lambeth – the Streatham Common Co-operative, “directly accountable to the local community and responsive to local needs”. It is clearly a successful and resourceful community organization well able to serve people living around Streatham Common. We in Happy Valley Friends, with access to the Co-operative, would be happy to arrange for you to explore the merits of this model of ‘Friends’ and the possible applicability to spaces in Croydon.

## **WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY**

In recent times, perspective on Croydon's open spaces has been mainly reliant on the Association of Croydon Conservation Societies (ACCS). It comprises six regional/national established conservation-based agencies helping sustain habitats across a number of open spaces, the local Natural History and Scientific Society, and 'The Friends' of thirteen green spaces whose focus is to cherish and protect the quality of their particular open space. A richly illustrated map, *Green Croydon*, issued by ACCS with support from ten member bodies is in its fourth reprint.

The ACCS chair wrote to you (27 August '22) about the requirements of four of these conservation bodies, emphasizing lack of corporate insurance through the Council, needed grants for tools, difficulties in liaising between groups in the absence of key parks staff, and planning groundwork when contracts are close to expiring. Alongside these concerns, the chair warns that changes in biodiversity are being missed in the absence of skilled ecological supervision.

The Chair of Rickman Hill Park Friends, on behalf of the 13 of 'The Friends of' group, also wrote to you (4 August '22), about difficulties faced in common: lack of a council backed insurance scheme, use of, and fearful resort to, Trust status; lack of a handbook on agreed roles regarding tangible cooperation; and real concern that the Council's Community Infrastructure Levy monies are not being used to support Friends. He observed that across Croydon, policy on grass cutting still seemed haphazard, with real uncertainty over the concept of 'wilderness' areas.

CIL was introduced in 2010 and revised in 2019. In just the three years 2018-2021 the borough drew in £33.9m to be spent on needed new infrastructure and cultural amenities. From Coulsdon alone, in that time period, came £3.7m from redeveloped housing. CIL can be spent on an arm's length of good works, but prominent among them are play areas, parks and open spaces. £3.7m suggests ACCS's demands are modest indeed.

The parks Draft Renewal Strategy, drafted and left by the exiting staff, hinted that Croydon's open spaces would henceforth have to rely more on 'the community', without saying how. Friends groups, while devoting time and energy to their chosen patch ask, as in the two ACCS letters, for Council insurance cover, access to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106, demand gates to be locked at night, and more grass mowing. These 'asks' are small, but are having to be made in a context of bins remaining unemptied, toilets not working, and unchecked disruptive behaviour. More significantly, in a wider perspective, is the burnt-out country park visitor centre at Norwood needing a complete rebuild; and elsewhere in Croydon, a Fairfield Hall virtually frozen, and a Whitgift shopping mall half derelict. All needing major fresh Council financial support.

### Finally

Croydon people are currently deeply suspicious of council policy given the recent history of mis-management. Debate in Coulsdon over the Council's proposed freehold sale of Coulsdon Manor (hotel and golf course), for instance, faced accusation that the whole site could become a housing estate with the private sector making a small fortune at the community's expense. Suspicion is well based. A previous Administration in 2004 proposed auctioning open land immediately adjacent to Farthing Downs. A local campaign including myself, raised significant monies from local people, which was matched by the City of London. Woodplace Farm Field, and New Hill became a permanent and enduring part of Farthing Downs. If the approaches and suggestions outlined in this paper are not taken up the risk to open spaces in Croydon seems still very real.



Happy Valley is the largest of Croydon's open spaces at 101 ha. The Friends have been involved in its conservation for 17 years. The Valley is now part of the South London Downs National Nature Reserve, which takes in the City Commons as well – some 520 ha. in all. The Friends wish the Council well in the particular challenges it faces, and will continue to give the two authorities warm support.

Graham M Lomas, Chairman

(on behalf of the Friends of Farthing Downs and Happy Valley)

October 2022

Figure 1

## Index to sites

Grid reference Page number

## METROPOLITAN SITES

✓M27	• Spring Park and Threehalfpenny Woods	TQ 377 648	16	31 ha
✓M28	• Kingswood	TQ 351 603	17	37
✓M29	• Farthing Downs, Devilsden Wood and Happy Valley	TQ 309 568	18	157
✓M30	Croham Hurst	TQ 342 629	21	34
✓M46	Riddlesdown and the Rose and Crown Chalk Pit	TQ 331 600	23	66
✓M49	Kenley Common	TQ 332 588	25	59
✓M55	Addington Golf Course and Shirley Heath	TQ 364 644	26	145
✓M60	Addington Hills	TQ 353 645	29	52
✓M61	Hall Grange	TQ 356 653	30	2
✓M62	• South Norwood Sewage Farm (Country Park)	TQ 350 681	31	47
✓M63	• Selsdon Wood	TQ 359 619	33	45
✓M64	• Hutchinson's Bank, Frylands Wood and Chapel Hill	TQ 383 615	36	20

## GRADE I BOROUGH SITES

✓Cr.BI 1	The Beck and High Broom Wood	TQ 375 667	38	8
✓Cr.BI 2	• Foxley Wood	TQ 315 605	39	11
✓Cr.BI 3	Rowdown Wood and Birch Wood	TQ 390 629	40	28
✓Cr.BI 4	• Littleheath Woods	TQ 351 628	41	25
✓Cr.BI 5	Coulsdon Common	TQ 332 570	42	55
✓Cr.BI 6	Kingswood Shaw, Mossyhill Shaw and Beech Way Woodland	TQ 357 606	43	20
✓Cr.BI 7	Addington Court Golf Course	TQ 375 624	44	27
✓Cr.BI 8	Coulsdon Court Wood and Betts Mead	TQ 314 587	45	72
✓Cr.BI 9	Chipstead Chalk Pastures	TQ 290 575	46	21
✓Cr.BI 10	Woodside Brickworks	TQ 341 675	47	8
✓Cr.BI 11	Bradmore Green Pond	TQ 308 582	48	1
✓Cr.BI 12	Sanderstead Pond	TQ 340 613	49	-
✓Cr.BI 13	Bramley Bank	TQ 352 634	50	11
✓Cr.BI 14	Mitchley Wood	TQ 338 605	51	20
✓Cr.BI 15	Monks Orchard (Boundary)	TQ 368 670	51	75
✓Cr.BI 16	Purley Downs Golf Course	TQ 327 614	53	53
✓Cr.BI 17	Bears Wood	TQ 370 617	54	4
✓Cr.BI 18	Convent Wood	TQ 324 707	54	4
✓Cr.BI 19	Croydon Airport	TQ 313 627	55	64

## GRADE II BOROUGH SITES

✓Cr.BII 1	Lloyd Park and Coombe Farm	TQ 340 647	56	44
✓Cr.BII 2	Cane Hill Hospital	TQ 291 584	57	28
✓Cr.BII 3	Kenley House Pastures	TQ 328 591	58	9
✓Cr.BII 4	Hooley Farm Pastures	TQ 298 578	58	22
✓Cr.BII 5	Royal Russel School and Ballard's Plantation	TQ 346 640	58	34
✓Cr.BII 6	Spring Park Wood	TQ 374 655	60	3
✓Cr.BII 7	Heavers Meadow and Norbury Brook	TQ 334 675	60	3
✓Cr.BII 8	Ashen Grove	TQ 361 626	61	1
✓Cr.BII 9	Whitgift School Wood	TQ 322 638	61	1
✓Cr.BII 10	The Ruffets	TQ 349 633	62	1
✓Cr.BII 11	Kenley Aerodrome	TQ 329 580	62	63
✓Cr.BII 12	• Sanderstead Plantation	TQ 344 619	63	6
✓Cr.BII 13	Stonyfield and Bleakfield Shaws	TQ 307 589	64	4
✓Cr.BII 14	The Glade	TQ 359 670	64	1
✓Cr.BII 15	Beulah Hill Pond (Boundary)	TQ 317 706	64	1
✓Cr.BII 16	Spring Park Ponds	TQ 369 657	65	2
✓Cr.BII 17	Long Lane Wood	TQ 355 675	66	3
✓Cr.BII 18	Biggin Wood	TQ 317 702	66	5
✓Cr.BII 19	• Purley Beeches	TQ 329 619	67	3
✓Cr.BII 20	Beaulieu Heights	TQ 334 695	68	7
✓Cr.BII 21	Southeastern tip of Croham Hurst Golf Course	TQ 346 626	69	1

## LOCAL SITES

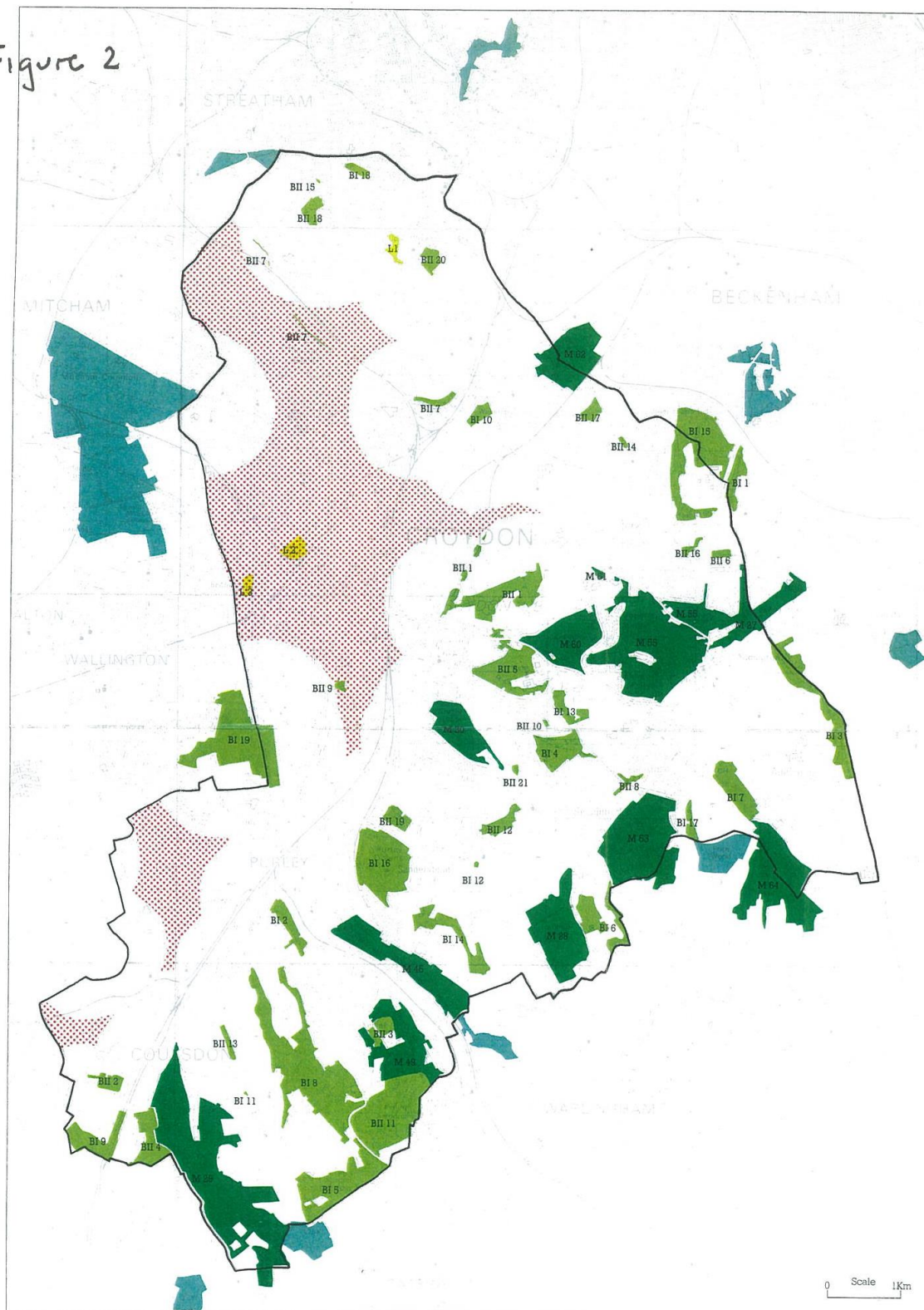
✓Cr.L 1	The Lawns Upper Norwood	TQ 329 697	70	4
✓Cr.L 2	✓ Wandle Park	TQ 315 658	70	16
✓Cr.L 3	✓ Waddon Ponds	TQ 309 651	71	2

1548 ha



Figure 2

Nature conservation sites important to the Borough of Croydon, and Areas of Deficiency.



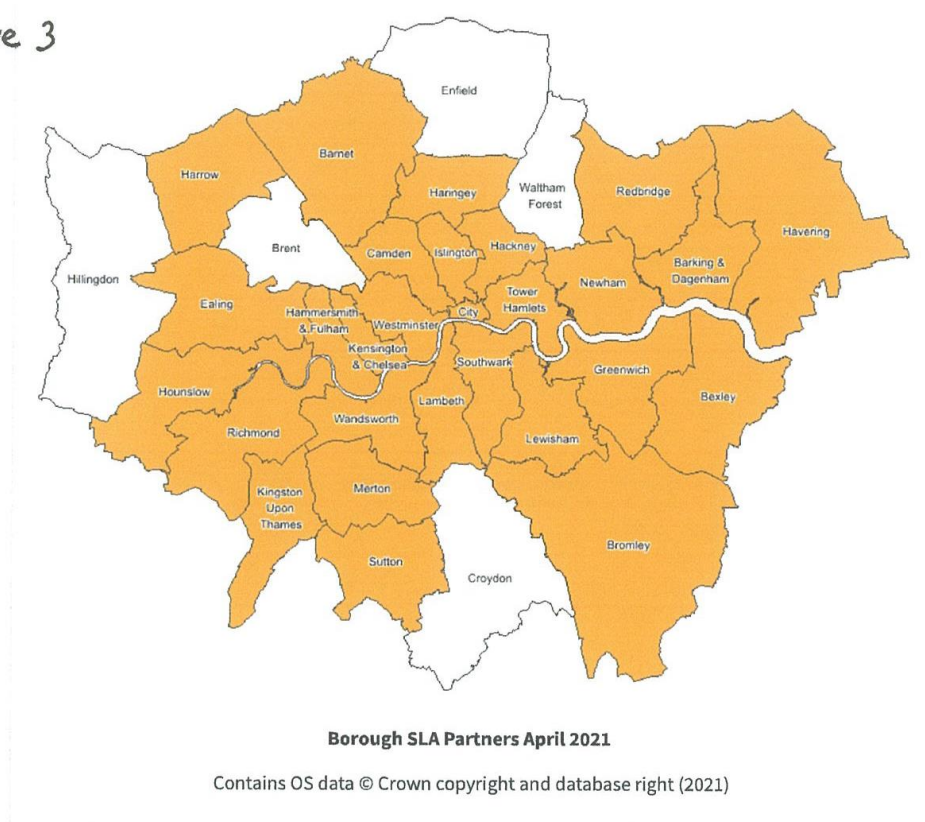
0 Scale 1Km

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Key:

- Sites of Metropolitan Importance in Croydon.
- Sites of Borough Importance in Croydon.
- Sites of Local Importance in Croydon.
- Sites in neighbouring counties and London Boroughs which are important to Croydon.
- Areas more than 1 kilometre from accessible Metropolitan or Borough sites, or sites of equivalent quality in neighbouring counties or boroughs (Areas of Deficiency).

Figure 3



## Potential Partners

Not all organisations in London that would benefit from a GiGL service level agreement are currently partners. The below is a list of organisations we would like to engage with further.

- Colne Valley Landscape Partnership
- Crown Estates
- Forestry Commission
- London Borough of Brent
- London Borough of Croydon
- London Borough of Enfield
- London Borough of Hillingdon
- London Borough of Waltham Forest
- London Fire Brigade
- London Legacy Development Corporation
- National Trust