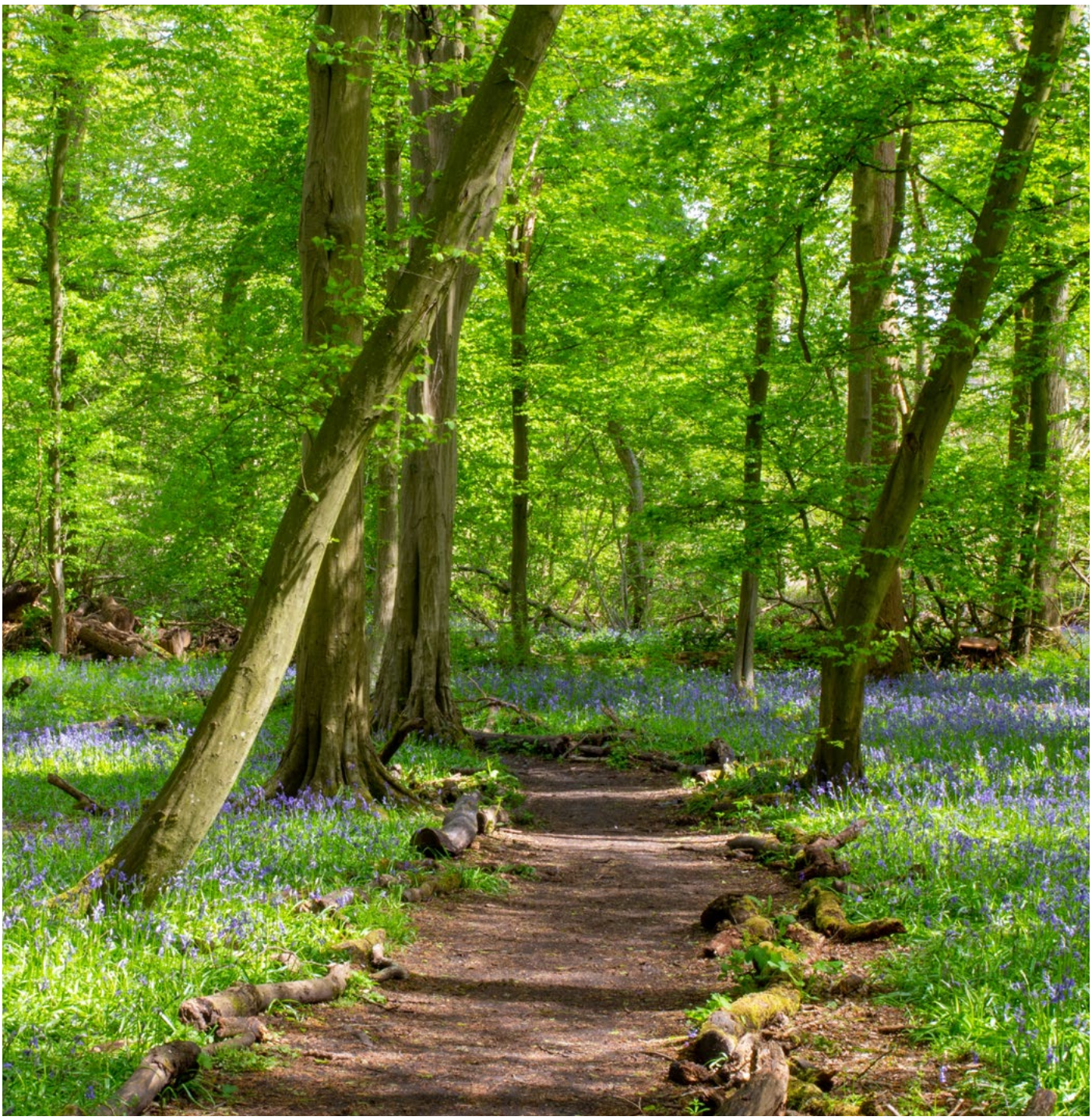
STEVENAGE BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN:

A Wilder Stevenage 2024-2028



Stevenage
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Contents

1. Aims and Objectives

The Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) has been commissioned to undertake a review of the 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) for Stevenage Borough Council (SBC).

The overall aim of this review is to increase biodiversity (natural habitats and the species they support) across Stevenage by defining, facilitating and enabling a coordinated programme of practical action by Stevenage Borough Council, working with the local community, that will also contribute to natural solutions to the climate crisis in Stevenage and Hertfordshire.

This will be achieved by:

1. Assessing progress achieved on actions within the 2017-2022 BAP, reviewing the information contained within the BAP and revising as necessary.
2. Through site visits, review and prioritise recommendations made for Local Wildlife Sites in 2013 to ensure their value is conserved and where appropriate increased.
3. Through site visits, identify prioritise projects for capital funding to increase the biodiversity of Stevenage and increase residents' awareness, understanding and engagement with nature in Stevenage.
4. Meeting with Stevenage Borough Council officers to understand their aspirations for the BAP to ensure compatibility with other strategic documents.
5. Meeting with key volunteers/stakeholders to understand their views on the BAP and to gather their views on future priorities.
6. Prepare a new plan for a Wilder Stevenage, which will:
    - focus on, but will not be limited, to SBC's estate
    - be realistic and achievable but remaining ambitious, within the capacity of SBC and partners
    - be compatible with and complement the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) BAP
    - be accessible, in language terms, to the wider Stevenage community
    - provide evidence of need, to support future funding bids to assist with delivery
    - include proposals for projects which could be delivered by supporting and enabling the community of Stevenage residents and businesses through a 'Wilder Stevenage' initiative.
    - Identify priorities within the action plan based on protecting those sites already important to wildlife and/or identifying sites that could lose potential for wildlife if works not delivered within the next 5-8 years.
7. A monitoring plan which includes initiatives to which the local community can contribute and lead

The delivery of the BAP is the responsibility of Stevenage Borough Council, supported by key partners. Progress will be monitored by a Steering Group and is to be detailed in an Annual Report.

The following sections set out the actions recommended for all the sites within the 2017-2022 plan, followed by a review summary paragraph. At the end of each section, revised actions for the coming plan period 2024-2028 are set out in a table.

2. Grassland Habitat

Overall objective: To conserve, link and diversify the composition and structure of Stevenage's grasslands to optimise their value to wildlife and people.

Lowland semi-natural grasslands have long been recognised as a resource of high nature conservation value. They contain a high proportion of plant species native to the UK and many of the grassland types occurring on neutral and base-rich soils, such as are found in Stevenage, support a particularly good diversity, including some rare plants and invertebrates. Some calcareous or 'chalk' grasslands may have 50 plant species per square metre. Semi-natural grasslands are defined as plant communities where a high proportion of the vegetation consists of a mixture of native grasses and herbs, where woody shrubs are largely absent and where vegetation height is usually less than one metre. Importantly, the species composition of these grasslands has not been substantially modified by intensive cultivation or the regular use of inorganic fertilisers.

Many of the sites, along with potentially important grassland areas in the Borough are owned or managed by Stevenage Borough Council, with others controlled by Hertfordshire County Council and Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. This high percentage of habitat area managed by organisations with a commitment to biodiversity offers high potential for this local Biodiversity Action Plan to influence positively the majority of the grassland sites of conservation importance in the Borough. In Stevenage Borough, grassland habitats of all types cover an area of 446.9 ha accounting for 17.2% of the Borough, somewhat less than the county figure of 21.3% for this habitat type.

Stevenage Borough contains a significant amount of both unimproved and semi-improved grassland. Unimproved grassland, where the habitat has only been "improved" to a minimal degree is particularly important as it supports a wide range of plants, some of which are scarce or rare. The major threat to these sites is natural succession to scrub and eventually woodland, leading to a loss of the rarer grassland habitats through shading and drying. The management of these sites therefore requires the introduction of a management regime to prevent domination by scrub, thereby allowing the flowers and grasses to flourish.

Semi-improved grasslands have usually been treated with herbicide and inorganic fertiliser. They retain some of the species associated with unimproved grassland, though they are likely to have lost the more specialised and rarer species. Restoration to a more species-rich sward is possible in the medium term, though it will depend on the nutrient levels in the soil, the proximity of seed sources and most importantly the reinstatement of an appropriate management regime. Restoration of semi-improved grasslands to a more species-rich sward would have particular benefits where these are adjacent to existing unimproved sites, as a larger area of grassland would allow populations of insects, mammals and birds to use the habitat and may allow the spread of scarce species.

Existing public open spaces provide opportunities for a more scenic and natural environment with the development of a wildlife-friendly management regime. Fairlands Valley Park, forming the largest open space within Stevenage, has substantial wildlife potential, which could be realised with an appropriate regime. Through the last BAP period some areas of grassland were reverted to a hay cutting regime. Less frequent cutting of the sward like this, to create diversity of structure would encourage a variety of invertebrate and plant species with the more botanically diverse areas ideally being managed in a traditional hay-cut style. This regime has also been extended to some long and wide grassland roadside verges of Stevenage. Most road verges are still mown regularly in the interests of road safety and / or tidiness. Clearly, road safety is of paramount importance and verges need to be kept short on a bend in the road or where tall grass could restrict visibility. However, there are opportunities to review the current maintenance regime in a number of locations.

It must be recognised that the lack of mowing in public open spaces and roadside verges may be viewed by the general public as dereliction of duty or lowering of standards by the council. However, as a result of work done during the last BAP period where some areas were allowed to grow long, there is the opportunity to highlight the benefits that such a change provides. Since 2011 the area of meadow managed grassland in Stevenage has increased by 1500%. This has been accompanied by a programme of education to explain the rationale behind the action and the benefits to wildlife.

2.1 Review of 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan:

Habitat Action G1: Local Grassland Wildlife Sites

Recommendations

- That Stevenage Borough Council include appropriate policies within the Local Development Framework (LDF), Local Plan and other strategic documents to protect all grassland Local Wildlife Sites from damage through development and where possible seek funds to improve their ecological status as compensation for ecological impacts.

Review

The Local Plan was published in 2019, with appropriate actions having been undertaken on a large number of sites.

Habitat Action G2: Martins Way

Martins Way is a well-established but artificially created chalk grassland site. The ideal management is to graze in the winter, but this is unfortunately impossible on this small site. The next best option is to cut and clear regularly to retain and develop its interest. Although nutrient deposition and scrub succession is slow due to the slope and the thin soil, it will continue to decline in floral diversity and scrub cover will increase if it is not managed. The steepness of the slope means that this will be difficult but it is such a floristic asset that its management should be prioritised.

Recommendations

- Cut and clear grassland annually in September, ideally remove arisings or cut them finely and leave them to fall down the slope into a sacrificial area at its base.
- Cut and treat the encroaching scrub with herbicide to retain grassland habitat.
- Cut and treat with herbicide the scrub line that is developing at the base of the slope. This will aid future management by enabling easier access to the area.
- Include agreed regime in a Stevenage Borough Grassland Mowing Plan.

Review

This is still an excellent chalk grassland site. Scrub clearance has been undertaken on a 3-year cycle, in 2017, 2020 and 2024.

However, scrub continues to encroach at both the top and bottom of the bank which if not addressed will lead to the decline and loss of the site.

Habitat Actions G3-G6: Shackledell Grassland

An ancient unimproved grassland site at the eastern edge of the Fairlands Valley Park. A stream runs along the grassland edge and there is an old hedge around the margins. It is the only Hertfordshire site where the Great Green Bush-cricket is found.

Considerable progress on this site has been achieved under previous BAPs. The area of grassland has been increased, with a corresponding response in the flora. Cutting back of the scrub is undertaken and cutting regimes introduced. In addition, complementary strips of habitat linking grassland were created alongside the original area. A new species-rich hedge-line was planted to delineate the edge of the new area and to provide more productive habitat.

Recommendations

- The Great Green Bush Cricket requires bare earth or short turf for egg laying and the interface between scrub and rank grassland for foraging. Work should continue to gradually push back the encroaching scrub until it forms a sinuous fringe around the edge of the original meadow area of 3-5m in width. This will increase the length of this scrub/ rank grassland fringe and warm pockets in the bays created for basking invertebrates. This should then be augmented with a regular and formalised cutting and clearing regime for the grassland element of the site.
- Create a central flower-rich area by cutting and clearing twice a year, in July and September, together with a thick rough grassland fringe to the border scrub. The rough grassland fringe around the outside of the grassland should be 10m in width and cut and cleared once every 3 years on rotation (a third of the area cut every year).
- The additional grassland that has been created should be managed in a similar manner. The principles should be a long grass/hedgerow interface strip of 5m managed by cutting and clearing rotationally on a 3-year rotation (cutting in September), together with cutting and clearing the rest of the grassland twice a year in July and September.
- A Great Green Bush Cricket monitoring regime should be introduced consisting of counting and plotting singing males in the summer months and could be conducted by suitably trained volunteers.

Review

Progress continues to be made on this important site on all the previous actions. The original area of grassland has been expanded by annual cutting back of the scrub and implementing cutting and clearing to the existing and newly reclaimed areas. The area looked excellent in 2023, with the monitoring team (formed in 2018) recording 30+ Great Green Bush-crickets in July. The additional grassland was flower-rich and supporting many invertebrates.

Habitat Action G7: Triangular Grassland by Fairlands Valley Park

A triangular area of unimproved grassland that has become rank with scattered scrub. There is a good mix of neutral grass and herb species present. Little of the original grassland remains but where it does occur it is species-rich, with a high potential to regenerate.

Recommendations

- Management should focus on clearing back the scrub from the glades.
- Care must be taken to treat the stumps with herbicide, to prevent vigorous regrowth.
- As glades are created, they should be managed by rotational cutting and clearing on a 3-year basis.

Review

Clearance works have been undertaken on at least two occasions, however, more work is required.

Habitat Action G8-G9: Six Hills Common

These six burial mounds are in the middle of Stevenage and support neutral / acid grassland of considerable age. The plant species include indicators of unimproved grassland and some county scarce plants including Harebell and Crested Hair-grass. An historic lack of clearance after cutting on the areas between the mounds led to nutrient enrichment and the increase of rank grasses such as False Oat-grass. In addition, Ragwort was increasing due to the actions of rabbits.

Recommendations

- Cut and clear the flat areas between the mounds in July, and then cut and clear both the mounds and the flat areas again in September.
- Introducing a hay cut in July will help to prevent the Ragwort from seeding.

Review

Current grassland management regime looks good, with key species still present. Annual management has been undertaken, initially twice but latterly just in September. Good amounts of Harebell present. Ragwort control has been undertaken, with minimal present in 2023.

Habitat Action G10: Whomerley Wood Road Verge

A wide roadside strip of neutral grassland on the northern side of Whomerley Wood along Six Hills Way. Grassland indicators include Common Bent, Crested Dog's-tail, Lesser Hawkbit, Oxeye Daisy, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil, Meadow Buttercup, Common Sorrel, Lesser Stitchwort and Germander Speedwell.

This Local Wildlife Site was designated in 2012, recognised as a result of the hay-cutting mowing regime introduced through the previous BAP. Seventy two species of plant were discovered during its survey including 12 unimproved grassland indicators such as Common Spotted Orchid.

Recommendations

- The ideal management for this grassland is to simulate traditional hay meadow management. Cut and clear in mid-July and September to create the conditions to maximise floral diversity.
- The floristic enhancement can be further increased by cutting and removing turfs of 1m2 in the sward and spreading appropriate wildflower seed, selected from the component parts of National Vegetation Classification MG5 communities and sown in the autumn.

Review

Road verge generally looking good, with annual clearance undertaken in autumn. Seeding has not happened and could still be considered, although the site appears fairly species-rich

Habitat Action G11-G16: Stevenage Brook Marsh

Stevenage Brook Marsh is managed by the Environment Agency. It is a relatively large area of rank wet grassland interspersed with developing swamp and tall herb fen communities. It is managed by cutting paths and offers an attractive and extensive area of early succession vegetation which serves as a buffer and complimentary habitat to the brook. The site is interspersed with trees which add to the diversity of the habitat.

Stevenage Brook is a chalk stream, an internationally rare and important habitat. The marsh is particularly important as it forms part of a wildlife corridor from Knebworth Park to Stevenage Golf Centre.

Recommendations

- In order to retain the open nature of the brook, regular scrub clearance along its banks is advised.
- Invasive species, such as Giant Hogweed, Himalayan Balsam and Canadian Goldenrod, are present. A long-term control programme should be developed.
- To increase habitat diversity and prevent inevitable succession to woodland, rotational cutting of the tall herb areas should be introduced. Aim to cut and clear 20% of the grassland/tall herb areas onsite annually on a rotational basis. Ultimately the best option for this site would be to introduce low level grazing. This should be investigated.
- The arboretum at the west end should be thinned by 50% to create a more diverse habitat structure and encourage the ground flora to develop.
- Creating more complexity by digging ponds and scrapes within the grassland areas would add more complexity and diversity of habitat.
- At present the brook appears artificially straight. Consideration should be given to creating meanders or backwaters in the stream to simulate more natural conditions and complexity.

Review

Low level management undertaken including some tree works but little or no progress on any major projects, including pond creation or brook re-working as awaiting completion of modelling works by the Environment Agency

Habitat Action G17: Poplars Meadow

Remnant of an ancient hay meadow, with an old pond to the south. The meadow has become increasingly rank over the years and has lost much of its interest, which included a diverse ground flora with 16 grassland indicator species including Betony. The ecological diversity is enhanced by the broad enclosing hedgerows of Blackthorn scrub with mature Oak stands and the ancient spring-fed pond supporting a wide range of aquatic plants including the national rare Opposite-leaved Pondweed.

Recommendations

- Reinstate traditional hay meadow management, cutting and clearing in July and September.

Review

This meadow still retains species of importance, including Dropwort and Betony. The site clearly receives annual cut and clearance, as well as scrub clearance.

Habitat Action G18: St Nicholas Churchyard

This is a churchyard and road verge with high botanical interest, supporting species-rich neutral grassland over chalk, with hedgerows and trees. The grassland includes a population of Meadow Saxifrage, which has also been recorded along the adjacent road verge. Additional species recorded include Lesser Knapweed, Bird's-foot Trefoil, Lady's Smock, Field Wood-rush, Meadow Buttercup and Bulbous Buttercup.

Management has been introduced to increase the floral diversity of the site. Due to many years of cutting and leaving the cuttings the site is nutrient-rich. When cutting is relaxed it can result in an explosion of competitive grasses which swamp the finer vegetation.

Recommendations

- Locate areas of greatest potential and continue to maintain them as before with regular cutting. Relax the cutting for four weeks to correspond with the flowering period of the target species e.g. Meadow Saxifrage and Lady's Smock in May, Oxeye Daisy, Birds-foot Trefoil, Lady's Bedstraw in June, and Knapweed in July.
- When the flowering period has finished, cut and remove the arisings, then return to the regular cutting regime. This will reduce the competition of the dominant grasses, develop the floral interest over time.

Review

This is still a diverse and wild churchyard, supporting much wildlife. However, although annual cutting has taken place, a more intensive regime is required. There is still a diversity of wildflowers but the sward is dominated by the competitive False Oat-grass.

Habitat Action G19: Symonds Green Common

Symonds Green Common is an old village green now enclosed by housing development and crossed by a small road and footpath. The green consists of an area of semi-improved, rough and somewhat tussocky, neutral to acidic grassland with a wet ditch and small ponds. The grassland is wet and relatively species-poor.

Recommendations

- Simulate traditional hay meadow management. This involves cutting and clearing twice a year, in July and September.

Review

Overall looking good, with the grassland appearing rich in flowering plants in July 2023, with abundant invertebrates. Margins and paths had been mown to give a 'cared-for' look. Rotational cutting and clearance, of around 50%, has been undertaken and should be continued.

Habitat Action G20-G21: Green Spaces

Green space in Stevenage includes both sporting facilities such as football pitches, parkland and roadside verges. However, the large areas of parkland can provide more than enough space for leisure activities such as walking and sport whilst also providing an opportunity to improve the site for wildlife. The potential for ecological enhancement was highlighted in the previous Stevenage BAP.

Recommendations

- Alter the management regime in Fairlands Valley Park to simulate hay meadow management i.e. cutting and clearing twice a year in mid-July and September. This should be augmented by cutting and removing turfs within the sward and seeding with NVC MG5 communities. These actions above are suitable volunteer tasks.
- Road verge management should be similarly reviewed. Opportunities to expand and link further areas of road verge should be explored. Include the agreed mowing regime changes in the Stevenage Borough Mowing Plan.

Review

Significant progress has been made in changing the management of areas within Fairlands Valley Park to create substantial interconnected grassland habitat. This has led to an expansion of this habitat and added interest to the park.

Extensive areas of grassland in wider road verges looked very flowery in July/August 2023. This is a considerable achievement and a huge gain for biodiversity.

Habitat Action G22-G23: Stevenage Golf Course

Stevenage Golf Course and its surroundings provide a significant area of grassland. Clearly, the vast majority of the area is the golf course itself, with well-managed fairways and greens. At the moment the mowing regime is extended right up to the boundary hedges, leaving little or no long grass and a corresponding lack of opportunity for plants to flower.

A diverse mixture of grass and flower species combined with a variety of vegetative structure provides an attractive habitat a variety of invertebrates, including butterflies, grasshoppers and crickets, all of which are part of the wider food chain.

Recommendations

- Widen the areas of long grass around the margins by up to 2 metres without any detrimental effect to the golf course itself.
- At the corners of the boundaries, mowing across the corner instead of into it, will provide pockets of tall grassland.
- Extend the amount of long grass, or 'rough', along the tree lines between the fairways.

Review

Little progress with these actions.

Habitat Action G24: Local Nature Reserves

Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are for both people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally and offer people special opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply enjoy it.

Recommendations

- Assess all grassland sites to determine if any are eligible for designation as a Local Nature Reserve.

Review

Ongoing action. Shackledell Grassland is a key candidate for LNR status (Action GR13).

2.2 Actions for Biodiversity 2024-2028: Grasslands

Action No.	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
GR1 Grass-lands	Grasslands	Seek to update cutting and scrub management regimes in light of this review, in a more strategic manner.	SBC	Priority. Secure funding for multi-site action.	More community involvement will be beneficial on a number of sites. Update all Grassland Mowing Plans.
GR2	Martins Way (21/026)	Scrub cutting and treatment to be continued on a 3-year rotation	SBC	Priority	Include in an updated Grassland Mowing Plan
GR3	Shackledell Grassland (29/041)	Continue current scrub and grassland mowing regimes as in the management plan.	SBC	Priority.	Included in a management plan for this site.
GR4	Triangular Grassland (29/059)	Open up and cut/clear grassland, knock back & treat scrub margins.	SBC		Include in Shackledell management plan
GR5	Six Hills Common (29/042)	Continue current mowing regime.	SBC		
GR6	Whomerley Wood Road Verge	Continue current mowing regime.	SBC	Priority.	
GR7	Stevenage Brook Marsh (30/005)	More intensive cutting and scrub management regime required.	EA	Priority.	Water quality also an issue (see Action WE below)
GR8	Poplars Meadow (30/009)	Re-establish rotational hay cutting regime. Cut c75% annually. Cut back scrub to create grass/scrub 'scallops'.	SBC	Priority	Include in an updated Grassland Mowing Plan
GR9	St Nicholas Churchyard (21/025)	Instigate a more targeted, rotational cutting pattern.	SBC		
GR10.	Symonds Green Common (21/022)	Maintain and refine current hay cutting and scrub management.	SBC	Priority	
GR11	Green Spaces	Review grassland areas and initiate strategic approach.	SBC	Priority	More varied grass regime, buffering of woodland and some scrub initiation.
GR12	Stevenage Golf Course	Initiate discussions between Golf Course, SBC and HMWT	SBC	Priority.	Aim to work on wildlife-friendly management plan.
GR13	Local Nature Reserves	Investigate potential LNRs, notably Shackledell Grassland.	SBC		

3. Woodland habitat

Overall objective: To conserve and enhance Stevenage's woodlands. To develop and maintain an appropriate structure within the woodlands to optimise their value for wildlife and people.

Woodlands are an important element in the natural environment of the Borough of Stevenage. They provide opportunities for recreation, are a valued component of the landscape, an essential habitat for wildlife, provide employment and are an effective means of absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Many woodland blocks in Stevenage are identified as being 'ancient woodland' (that which has been in existence since at least 1600) and are described as 'semi-natural' because the woodlands have received past management. These represent the most important woodland habitats for wildlife, sometimes containing species of local and regional rarity. It is highly unusual to find so much ancient woodland in an urban environment and they are a wonderful resource for the borough. The majority of woods are comprised of broad-leaved species, although some elements of coniferous plantations exist, the result of historical forestry planting for wood production rather than biodiversity.

The woodland type characteristically found in Stevenage is the Oak and Hornbeam stand type with Bluebell dominant in the ground flora. This woodland type has been identified as being internationally important in the EU Habitats Directive. Typical tree species found locally include Pedunculate Oak, Hornbeam, Beech, Ash, Wild Cherry, Silver Birch, Alder and Willows. Locally found shrubs include Hazel, Field Maple, Hawthorn, Dogwood, and Holly. Additionally, in Stevenage, a range of planted exotic trees can be found in some woodland, including Corsican Pine, Western Hemlock and Western Red Cedar. A good diversity of woodland ground flora includes native Bluebell, Wood Anemone, Yellow Archangel, Sanicle and Wood Mellick. Past records of rarities include Bird's–nest and Early Purple Orchids, and Violet Helleborine.

In Stevenage, there exists around 130 hectares of woodland, which includes semi-natural broad-leaved, planted broad-leaved, planted coniferous, planted mixed woodlands and parkland. This represents around 5% of the Borough, somewhat lower than county and national averages. However, given the urban perception of Stevenage town, this is a considerable natural resource. Around 54 hectares is defined as 'ancient woodland' (from Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory).

Rather than comprising of a few relatively large woodlands, the Borough of Stevenage has many small woodland blocks. As a result, the woodlands exhibit a large 'edge-effect' – a large amount of edges, compared to their size. Whilst this may benefit feeding birds and bats, a large length of exposed edge mean that the woodlands are more affected by the adjacent land use. In many cases in Stevenage, adjacent land may have a negative effect on the woodland. For example, in a number of locations where houses back onto woodlands it was seen that the woods were used for dumping of garden and household waste. Garden waste has resulted in the establishment of non-native plants in some woodlands.

The woodlands of the borough are currently almost universally dense, dark and lacking in structure or dynamism. This condition significantly restricts their potential for wildlife. To improve their value for biodiversity and people they would benefit from a substantial programme of conservation work such as thinning, ride creation, glade creation, removal of non-native tree species and coppicing.

If the woodland resource is considered in the whole it could provide an attractive proposition for a woodland contractor to harvest, provided that that harvesting was to an agreed plan and primarily to benefit biodiversity. If managed correctly a considerable amount of structural work could be undertaken at no cost to the authority or possibly even generating funds. The produce could even be sold locally to residents, developing a sustainable, local, low carbon source of green energy for the town.

In the last BAP, all woodlands and their management priorities were considered. The prescriptions could potentially inform wildlife conservation and habitat creation through a timber extraction agreement. These principles should therefore be drawn up into a five year plan and personalised for each woodland. This is equally relevant in this plan.

3.1 Review of 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan:

Habitat Action Wo1: Woodland Local Wildlife Sites

Recommendations

- SBC to include appropriate policies within the Local Plan and other strategic documents to protect all woodland Local Wildlife Sites from damage through development.

Review

The Local Plan was published in 2019, with appropriate actions having been undertaken on a large number of sites.

Habitat Action Wo2: Sishes Wood

Sishes Wood is an ancient Oak/Hornbeam woodland with mature Oak standards and Hornbeam coppice. The Oaks are for the most part aligned in rows suggesting that the wood is an old plantation on an ancient woodland coppice site. It has better structure than most of the woodlands and shows signs of being recently managed. In common with other local woodlands, it lacks light penetrating to the woodland floor. Where this does occur, more complex woodland vegetation has developed. It lacks rides or glades, and has a notable population of non-natives e.g. Cherry Laurel.

Recommendations

- Remove all non-native invasive species, notably conifers and Cherry Laurel and treat stumps with herbicide to prevent regrowth.
- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create wide central, sinuous ride through coppicing and felling trees of small diameter.
- Thin Sycamore copse on the south side of the wood by 50% and introduce coppicing.
- • Create glades and wide central ride in south side of woodland.

Review

A nice woodland of Hornbeam and Bluebells. Some reduction of invasive species has taken place in 2022 and 2023. Little or no coppicing appears to have taken place.

Habitat Action Wo3: Martin's Wood

Martin's Wood is a mixed woodland with some ancient coppice in close proximity to a housing estate. Former ancient Oak/Hornbeam coppice. Some Oak and Hornbeam standards remain but the wood had largely been replanted with Scots Pine and Beech. There is a Hornbeam hedge around the margin. Martin's Wood is also characterised by dense homogenous regrowth with little structural diversity. Recommended actions:

Recommendations

- Remove all non-native invasive species, including conifers
- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create wide central, sinuous rides through coppicing and felling trees of small diameter. Thin the woodland to create keyholes through which light can penetrate.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.
- Create a friends group to undertake management.

Review

A splendid Bluebell wood but trees very even-aged and very little undergrowth. Some good work on path delineation. Few conifers remain after significant removal.

Habitat Action Wo4: Monk's Wood West

Monk's Wood West is a privately owned thin strip of woodland adjacent to the Roaring Meg Retail Park and is a remnant of the larger block of woodland to the east. It is dominated by old Hornbeam coppice.

Recommendations

- Rotational coppice over 10-year period to create more structural diversity and stimulate the ground flora.

Review

No further work undertaken.

Habitat Action Wo5: Broadwater Marsh

Broadwater Marsh is a small, wet, steeply sloping secondary woodland in an urban area with an undegraded spring in the corner supporting three fen indicator species including clumps of Tussock Sedge. The difficulty of access, size, good structure and the relatively young age of the woodland means that management is not considered to be a priority on this site.

Recommendations

- It should be allowed to develop as a non- intervention woodland.

Habitat Action Wo6: Warren Springs

A privately-owned fragment of ancient semi-natural Oak/Hornbeam woodland adjacent to the old London Road. The woodland consists of overgrown Hornbeam coppice with a sparse under storey of Elder. There are a few Oak standards and some Cherry. The ground flora supports ancient woodland indicators including Bluebells and Dog Mercury. The site is locally important in that it contains the only site within Stevenage for Moschatel.

Recommendations

- Rotational coppicing of the Hornbeam and regular removal of litter. The installation of a fence would prevent fly tipping and prevent litter blowing into the woodland.

Habitat Action Wo7: Monk's and Whomerley Woods

Monk's and Whomerley Wood is the largest example of ancient Oak and Hornbeam woodland in Stevenage Borough at 25.29 ha. It has benefitted from clearance and management works conducted during the period of previous BAPs by the Stevenage Green Space Volunteers. Away from the worked areas, the woodland displays the familiar character of dark homogenous planted blocks or over-stood coppice with little diversity, structure or light penetrating to the floor. The work undertaken to open-up the wood demonstrates what can be achieved through this form of management. It should be expanded into the rest of the wood. Harvesting the wood through the use of a forestry contractor could be the best way of achieving this and should be explored.

However, the importance of the input of volunteers should not be underestimated, both for conservation benefit and to develop groups of residents with an emotional attachment to this environment. The future condition of the woodland requires that residents are knowledgeable and well informed about what beneficial management looks like and care that it is undertaken. The development of conservation volunteers who want to work on the woodland is a major achievement of the previous BAP. The woodland interpretation and discovery trail that has been installed over the previous plan period provides an excellent resource for residents.

Recommendations

- Remove all non-native invasive species, including conifers and Lesser Periwinkle.
- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible.
- Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Block some ditches to retain water in the woodland, creating diverse ground conditions.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or a guide to the Stevenage Woodlands electronic guide.
- Create a friends group to undertake management.

Review

In both woods there has been good coppice management with rides created and areas thinned, around one acre has been coppiced annually 2017-2023. There has been good pond restoration also.

Habitat Action Wo8: Wiltshire's Spring

Wiltshire's Spring is a small woodland to the south of the Fairland's Valley Boating Lake. It is a small remnant of ancient semi-natural woodland with a canopy of old Hornbeam coppice with Ash, Field Maple, and Hawthorn. A section of the wood to the west has been under planted with Beech and Scots Pine. The ground flora supports wood grasses, Bramble, Bluebell and Yellow Archangel.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that the conifers are removed and that it is thinned where it is too dense and little light penetrates to the woodland floor.

Review

Most of the conifers have been removed, the wood is in good condition and now requires minimal intervention.

Habitat Action Wo9: Fisher's Green Wood

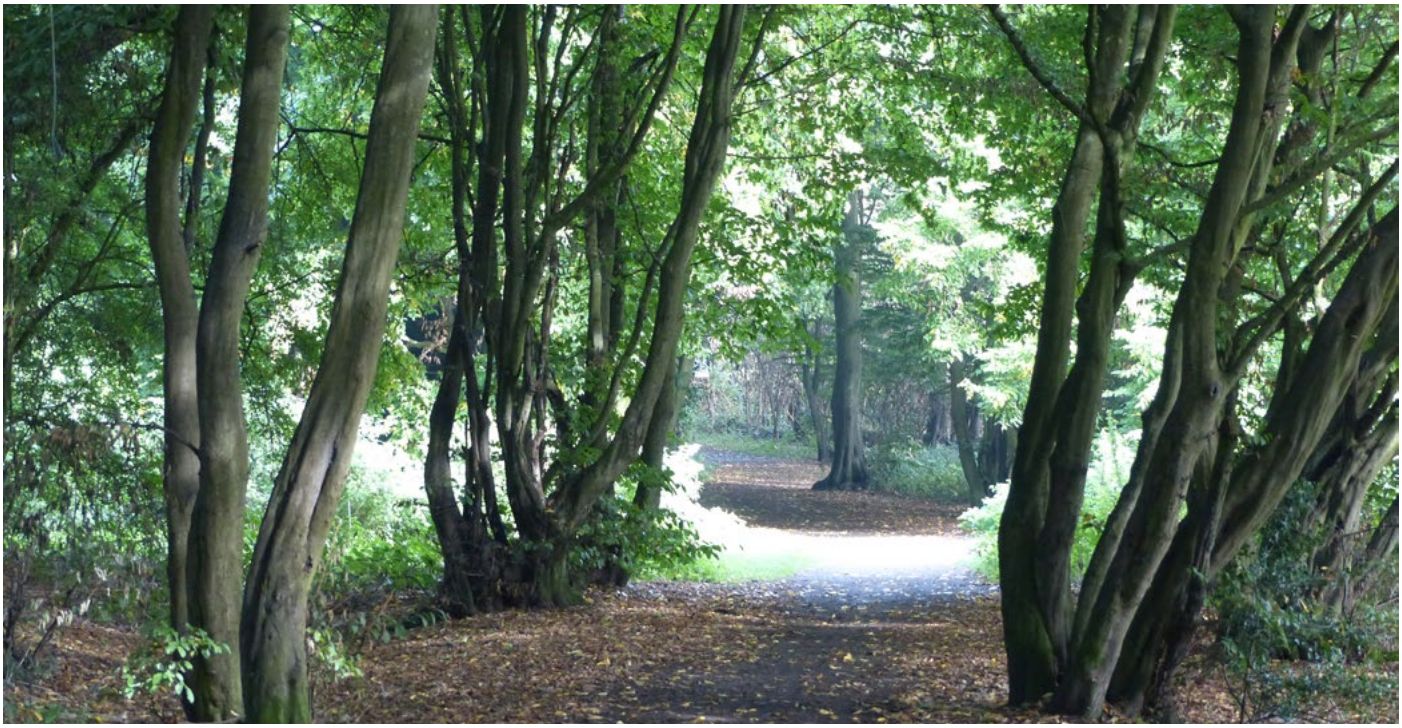
Fisher's Green Wood is a diverse thin strip of woodland with a well-developed ground flora. It consists largely of Hornbeam coppice.

Recommendations

- Reintroduce rotational coppicing of the younger stools.
- Ancient stools should be left in order to reduce the risk of killing.

Review

A lovely strip of woodland, largely in good condition and with works planned with S106 funds.



Habitat Action Wo10: Marymead Spring

This wet deciduous Hornbeam/Alder woodland with spring sources is surrounded by housing. The ground flora includes indicator species such as Bluebells and Wood Anemones, with wet woodland species also present.

Recommendations

- Introduce step weirs or terracing to the water course to hold back water, create small pools and wet areas subject to consent from the Environment Agency.

Review

Some work on ‘leaky dams’ has been undertaken in 2018/19 and there is a current proposal to remove c15 large poplars close to buildings on safety grounds. However, the wood is in poor condition with large amounts of litter and debris.

Habitat Action Wo11: Ashtree Wood and Abbotts Grove

An ancient semi-natural coppiced woodland composed of Hornbeam, Oak, Ash, Hazel, Cherry and Field Maple. The central areas had been extensively re-planted with species such as Beech, Cedar and Pine resulting in dense, dark woodland with little understorey. The ground flora supports ancient woodland indicators with a greater diversity of species associated with the semi-natural canopy along the edges. Bluebells and Dog's Mercury are abundant in places. There are some boundary coppice stubs and small wood banks within the wood.

Recommendations

- Remove conifers and all non-native invasive species, eg cultivated Yellow Archangel.
- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.
- Create a friends group to undertake management

Review

A rather dark woodland with homogenous structure and little understorey in most parts.

Habitat Action Wo12: Pestcotts Spring and Wood

Ancient semi-natural woodland with Hornbeam coppice and standards plus some Ash standards and Cherry, but substantially altered by planting throughout the wood except at the very edges and to the far north. The main canopy supports planted Larch, Beech and some Cherry with occasional Hornbeam and Ash. The ground flora supports a number of ancient woodland indicators with Bluebell dominant in the spring.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Do not re-coppice oldest Hornbeam stools, particularly ancient boundary trees.
- Remove all non-native invasive species. Remove conifers.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible.
- Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.
- Create a friends group to undertake management.

Review

There appears to have been little progress here.

Habitat Action Wo13: Great Collens Wood

An ancient semi-natural broadleaf woodland, replanted in places. The canopy is predominantly Hornbeam coppice with Ash, Cherry and Field Maple with a ground cover of Bramble, Bluebell and Dog's Mercury. The middle and southern sections have been replanted with Oak, Ash and Pine. Remnant standards and coppice can be found along the woodland edge in the replanted compartments.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.

Review

An extensively replanted woodland with a rather homogenous centre but with some nice old outgrown Hornbeam coppice. Limited works undertaken to date.

Habitat Action Wo14-Wo15: Hanging Hill Wood

Ancient semi-natural Oak/Hornbeam coppiced woodland fragment. The canopy is typically Cherry, Hornbeam, Ash and Oak with patches of young Beech. The understorey is mainly Hawthorn, Hazel and Elder with coppices of Hornbeam and Ash.

Hanging Hill Wood has comparatively more diverse structure and ground flora than many other woodlands. Its small sized allows light to penetrate from the sides which stimulates the edges of the wood.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.

Review

A small, nice piece of woodland at the top end of Fairlands Valley, with long grassland habitat introduced on the woodland margin. Good diverse structure with some nice standard Oak and Ash.

Habitat Action Wo16 : Wellfield Wood

Mixed plantation surrounded by housing and next to the new industrial area. Ancient semi-natural Oak/Hornbeam coppice woodland replanted with mainly Beech, Sycamore, Birch, Fir, Poplars and Field Maple. The ground flora supports typical ancient woodland indicators dominated by Bluebells and there is a ditch and hedge around the woodland boundaries.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.

Review

There appears to have been little progress here.

Habitat Action Wo17: Blacknells Spring

Thin strip of scrubby, ancient semi-natural woodland with a canopy typically of Hornbeam, Ash, Field Maple and Hawthorn. The ground flora supports wood grasses, Bramble, Bluebell and Yellow Archangel. This thin strip of remnant ancient woodland is compromised in terms of habitat quality by its width and proximity to housing.

Recommendations

- Remove garden waste and dumped material.

Review

A lower priority woodland for intervention.

Habitat Action Wo18: Ridlins Wood

Ridlins Wood is an ancient woodland site, which has been substantially replanted in the past. The stand type is Oak/ Hornbeam with Ash and Field Maple. The semi-natural habitat survives as overgrown Hornbeam Coppice in patches between semi-mature plantation of Scots Pine and Larch. Some Beech is also present in the plantations. The ground flora supports a good range of ancient woodland indicators and Bird's-nest Orchid has been recorded. This woodland together with Monk's and Whomerley Wood has the highest potential for improvement. Where gaps in the canopy allow, an interesting ancient woodland ground flora develops and it has more complex hydrological variations than most of the other woodlands.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.

Review

A nice wood with high potential. Much good work already achieved.

Habitat Action Wo19: Almond Spring

Fragment of ancient semi-natural Oak/Hornbeam woodland with Hornbeam, Cherry and Oak remnants mainly around the edges. The central area has been planted with Beech and some Pine. The ground flora is sparse but supports a small number of indicator species.

Recommendations

- Reinstate coppicing in sinuous strips rather than big coupes. Coppice younger Hornbeam, leave oldest stools.
- Create a network of wide, sinuous rides through the woodland based on existing desire lines. Rides should be a minimum of 10m wide – 20m if possible. Create glades through coppicing, link to ride network when possible.
- Formalise aims by producing a conservation management plan for the woodland.
- Install interpretation boards or an electronic guide to the Stevenage Woodlands.

Review

Small urban woodland that is in reasonable condition.

Habitat Action Wo20: Whitney Drive Wood

Small fragment of ancient semi-natural Hornbeam coppice woodland with large Oak standards. Formerly part of Whitney Wood. A diverse flora for a small wood includes a good number of ancient woodland indicator species.

Recommendations

This small urban woodland would benefit from general woodland management prescription but lower priority due to size and condition.

Review

Little work undertaken and not a high priority.

Habitat Action Wo21: Valley Way Wood

Planted mixed woodland with Oak, Larch and scrub supporting a number of plant species and structural features indicative of ancient woodland. The ground flora is dominated by Bramble and Bluebells.

Recommendations

- Would benefit from improving structure and eradication of non-native species as per general woodland management prescription.

Review

Little action undertaken to date.

Habitat Action Wo22: Loves Wood

Small area of ancient semi-natural Oak/Hornbeam woodland on the west side of Shephall Way. A large part has been cleared and some Oak and Ash replanted. The southern section comprises a Silver Fir plantation with some regeneration of coppice. The wood supports a number of ancient woodland indicator species and once formed a larger woodland along with Ridlins Wood.

Recommendations

- This woodland would benefit from removal of conifers and thinning as per general woodland together with ride creation and reinstatement of coppicing.

Review

Little action undertaken to date.

Habitat Action Wo23: Litter and Fly-tipping

Many of the woods are used extensively by the public and can accumulate a considerable amount of litter. Also, those woods adjacent to housing estates are often subjected to fly tipping.

Recommendations

- All woods should be inspected regularly, with litter and fly tipping removed as necessary.

Review

Unfortunately, an ongoing issue that needs to be maintained

Habitat Action Wo24: Local Nature Reserves

Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are for both people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally and offer people special opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply enjoy it.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that that all the woodland sites listed above are assessed to determine if any are eligible for designation as a Local Nature Reserve.

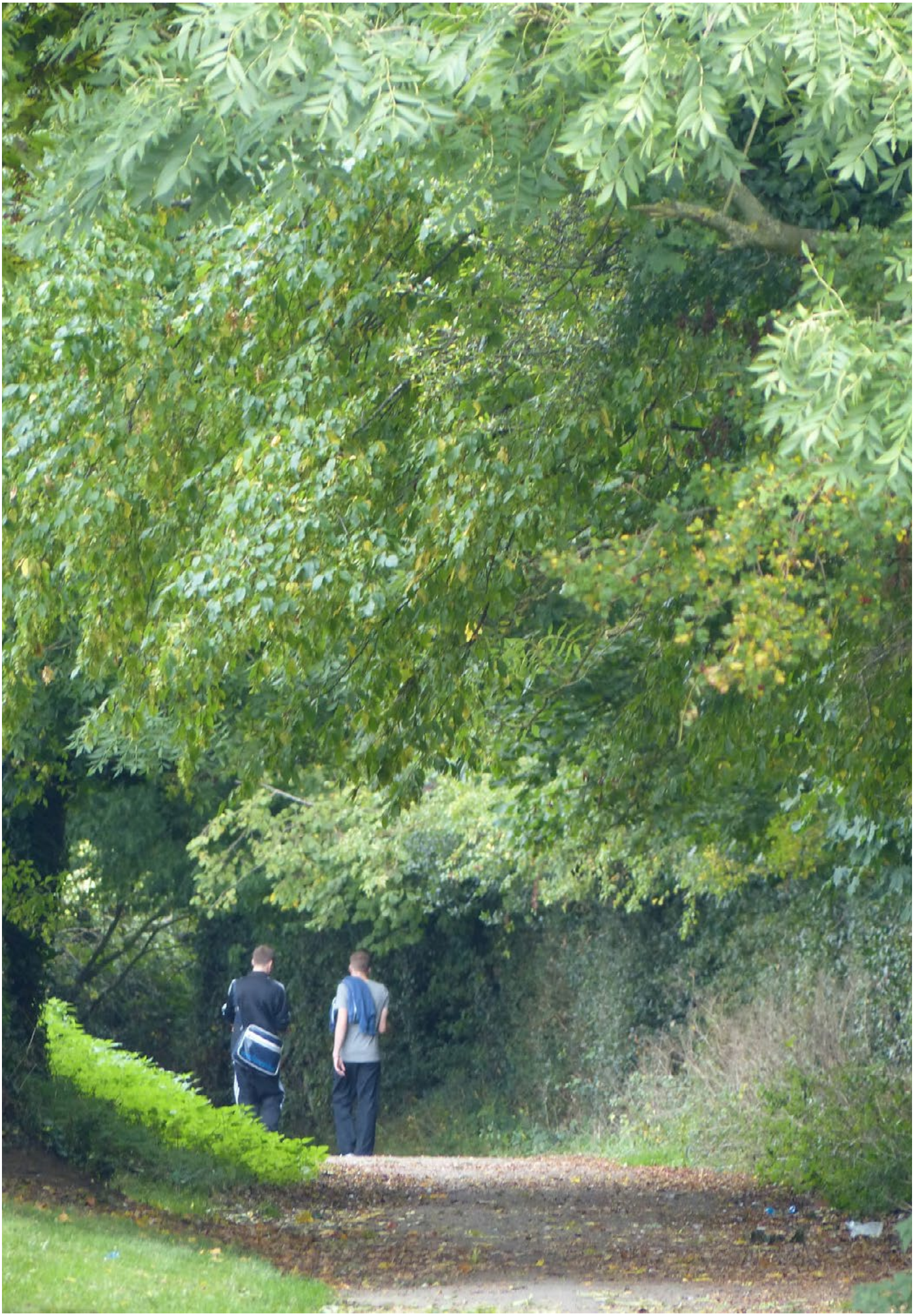
Review

Limited progress to date.

3.2 Actions for Biodiversity 2024-2028: Woodlands

Action No./ Site	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
WO1	Local Wildlife Sites	Update policies. Increase structural & species diversity, through coppicing, thinning and ride creation, softening woodland edges.	SBC	Priority. Secure funding to undertake this in a strategic manner	Seek timber extraction agreement to promote wider activity in prioritised woodland blocks.
WO2	Sishes Wood (22/002)	Continue removing non-native species. Increase structural diversity. Mark out pathways.	SBC		Continued removal of Cherry Laurel required. Litter clearance would be very beneficial.
WO3	Martin's Wood (22/004)	Introduce structural diversity through thinning, ride and glade creation.	SBC		
WO4	Monk's Wood West (29/034)	Rotational coppice over 10-year period.	Privately owned		Litter clearance would be very beneficial.
WO5	Broadwater Marsh (29/038)	Minimal intervention	SBC		
WO6	Warren Springs (29/039)	Minimal intervention	Privately owned		
WO7	Monks and Whomerley Woods (29/040)	Continue with coppicing, thinning, glade creation and conifer removal.	SBC	Priority	Investigate hydrology of ditches. Buffer margins.
WO8	Wiltshire's Spring (30/047)	Minimal intervention in woodland, create 5m uncut buffer around wood.	SBC		
WO9	Fisher's Green Wood (21/049)	Potential for selected coppicing	SBC		Work planned with S106 funds.
WO10	Marymead Spring (30/041)	Remove poplars on safety grounds, minimal intervention for woodland management	SBC		Litter clearance is a high priority.

Action No./ Site	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
WO11	Ashtree Wood & Abbotts Grove (30/028)	Thinning, ride and glade creation. Five year plan required.	SBC	Priority	Link management of these 3 woods.
WO12	Pestcotts Wood (30/045)	Thinning, ride and glade creation.	SBC	Priority	Link management of these 3 woods.
WO13	Great Collens Wood (30/043)	Thinning, ride and glade creation.	SBC	Priority	Link management of these 3 woods.
WO14	Hanging Hill Wood (22/041)	Minimal intervention in woodland, create 5m uncut buffer around wood.	SBC		
WO15	Wellfield Wood (22/005)	Thinning, ride and glade creation. Remove conifers.	SBC		
WO16	Blacknells Spring (30/046)	Minimal intervention for woodland management	SBC		Litter clearance is a high priority.
WO17	Ridlins Wood (30/003)	Continue thinning. Fell and thin Poplars, create ponds	SBC	Priority	Link management to nearby brook and Love's Wood.
WO18	Almond Spring (21/048)	Minimal intervention for woodland management	SBC		
WO19	Whitney Drive Wood (21/047)	Minimal intervention for woodland management	SBC		
Wo20	Valley Way Wood (30/051)	Improve structure, remove invasive non-native species .	SBC		Link to Shackledell Grassland management plan
Wo 21	Loves Wood (30/002)	Conifer removal, thinning	SBC		
Wo 22	Litter and fly-tipping	All woods should be inspected regularly, with litter and fly tipping removed as necessary.	SBC	Priority	
Wo23	Local Nature Reserves	Assess woodland sites to determine if any are eligible for designation as a Local Nature Reserve.	SBC		



4. Ancient Hedgerows

Overall objective: To manage Stevenage's ancient hedgerows to produce a diverse structure and to ensure their survival for the benefit of wildlife and local residents

Hedgerows resemble woodland edge and scrub habitats. They exhibit a wide range of variation and the most important are rich in relic species of ancient woodland. Some of these will be remnants of the original woodland cover retained to mark a boundary when the surrounding woods were first cleared. The oldest may have existed for more than 1000 years. These older hedges will usually contain a greater number of shrubs and trees than recent plantings and will therefore be of greater wildlife value.

The general perception of the design of a new town such as Stevenage is that of a large-scale housing development where some land is set aside for recreational facilities and the area made more environmentally friendly by the provision of grass verges and the planting of trees and shrubs along the streets. This provides an attractive living environment but, as the planting is of new stock, there is a lack of ancient woodland and hedgerows. This is not the case in Stevenage Borough. During the planning and development of Stevenage much of the existing semi-natural woodland was retained, which is why the borough is so rich in this important habitat. Also, prior to the building of the new town, the area contained a number of country lanes lined with ancient hedgerows and these too were incorporated into the design and were used to provide pedestrian links from one part of the town to the other. These ancient hedgerows are still present today and many of the country lanes have now been designated as cycle ways and are well used by pedestrians and cyclists alike.

The ancient hedgerows are a mix of mature standards such as Oak, Ash, Hornbeam and Field Maple, many of which are ivy-covered, and mature more traditional hedgerow species such as Hawthorn, Blackthorn and Elder. There are several signs that these hedgerows have been coppiced in the past but not in recent times. The main issue is, therefore, how to manage the hedgerows for the future. The mature standards are probably best left alone, although it may be necessary to coppice one or two to let in more light onto the ground below the hedge to encourage the growth of ground flora. The hedgerow species can either be managed by laying or coppicing and each hedge should be evaluated carefully on its own merits before deciding on which option to choose. In the past, many hedgerows were laid as this provided instant and robust stock fencing. However, this is inappropriate along what are now predominantly cycle ways and therefore the best option is to coppice, which will thicken the hedge and rejuvenate growth. This will produce thick luxuriant hedges with sunlight and occasional dappled shade from the retained mature standard trees, thereby increasing biodiversity and providing an attractive environment for both cyclists and pedestrians.

The objective of a previous plan was to produce an inventory of all the ancient hedgerows in the borough, whilst a policy and prescription for their conservation and management was the primary objective of the last plan.

4.1 Review of 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan

Habitat Action AH1: Kitching Green Lane

Of the 37 Wildlife Sites in Stevenage Borough, Kitching Green Lane is the only ancient hedgerow classified as a Local Wildlife Site. Old Green Lane stretching from Upper Kitching Spring woodland to the north to Pigeonswick Wood in the south. The site includes the boundary around Burleigh Meadow. Old Hornbeam stubs found along the lane adjacent to the wood. The green lane supports a gappy hedge of Blackthorn, Elm, Hazel and Elder. Five spikes of the very rare parasitic Greater Broomrape have been recorded along the ditch at the west end of Burleigh Meadow. The section of the green lane by Burleigh Meadow is part of the SSSI. Part of the site lies outside Stevenage Borough.

Recommendations

- Include appropriate policies within the Local Plan and other strategic documents to protect the Kitching Green Lane Wildlife Site from damage through development.

Review

The Local Plan was published in 2019. This site remains in reasonable condition.

Habitat Actions AH2-AH5: Non-designated Sites with Improvement Potential

Stevenage contains a number of ancient hedgerows along the pedestrian and cycle way links from one part of the town to the other.

Recommendations

- Following an inventory in the last BAP, the next step is to review the inventory and publish it. Only Kitching Green Lane, is designated as a Local Wildlife Site. The inventory should therefore be reviewed to see if any of the other ancient hedgerows meet the criteria for designation. Policy to be developed and agreed on the general approach to management and an Ancient Hedgerow Management Plan published.

Review

Management plans have been developed for six hedgerows, with actions at Shephall Lane instigated in 2019.

4.2 Actions for Biodiversity 2024-2028: Ancient Hedgerows

Action No.	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
AH1	Kitching Green Lane (29/018)	Requires hedgerow maintenance.	SBC	Priority.	
AH2	Non-designated sites	Review management & designation. Implement Hedgerow Conservation & Management Plans.	SBC	Priority.	

5. Wetlands

Overall objective: To conserve and restore Stevenage's wetlands through appropriate and sensitive management to optimise their value to wildlife and people

The term 'wetland' covers a diverse range of habitats. Within Hertfordshire alone this includes rivers, streams, springs, watercress beds, ponds, lakes, reservoirs, sewage works, marshes, fens, swamps, wet grassland and carr woodland. These wetlands are hugely important for both wildlife and people. Unfortunately in Stevenage, the variety of wetland is fairly restricted comprising ornamental lakes, ponds, springs, one swamp and streams.

Ornamental lakes account for by far the largest area of open water, being dominated by the five lakes in Fairlands Valley Park. This is a multi-use site, where nature conservation has to be considered alongside recreation and amenity uses. There are also a number of ponds in the Borough, some of which are associated with grassland or woodland Local Wildlife Sites. However, many of these are at threat of being lost unless they are brought under appropriate management as a matter of urgency. In Stevenage as well as the rest of the UK, the loss of wetland habitats may to some extent be compensated for by the increase in garden ponds and without this resource, many of our aquatic species would be at greater risk. Garden ponds are therefore an important part of our wetland habitats and should be encouraged.

As far as flowing water is concerned, the largest natural watercourse in Stevenage is the Stevenage Brook and its tributaries, running along the western half of the Borough. Aston End Brook extends along the eastern edge of the Borough. Both eventually enter the river Beane as they travel south into Hertfordshire. Due to their size and nature, both are prone to damage from pollution. The River Beane is a chalk stream and as such of international significance due to its rarity and special biodiversity. All of Hertfordshire's chalk streams are under threat from over-abstraction. Low flows are more susceptible to pollution as dilution is lessened.

The key issues on wetlands generally relate to either hydrology or management. Wetlands are now much reduced, fragmented and overall, drier. Nowadays water levels are still falling and a major concern is unsustainable abstraction of water. Wetlands have always been popular areas for human leisure and recreational activities. These pressures continue to increase and if unmanaged, pose a real threat to the biological integrity of many sites. The following issues are relevant to Stevenage's wetlands today.

Low water levels are the primary threat to all forms of wetland and there is a widespread feeling that all wetlands, from rivers to ponds, have never before been so short of water. Any long-term lowering of water levels in any wetland, or reduced incidence or duration of flooding, can cause severe losses in biodiversity and changes in community composition. Low flows or lowered water levels in ponds mean that pollution incidents are magnified because of a reduced dilution factor.

There is an inevitable process of natural succession to scrub and woodland as wetlands accumulate organic matter and dry out. This results in an overall loss of species, often scarce, especially if early successional stages are not regularly being re-created in compensation. Ponds and marshes are particularly vulnerable to rapid succession. Pond management can frequently be well intentioned but ultimately damaging. By aiming for attractive, mid-successional ponds, the valuable and differing features of ponds can be destroyed. Given the number and diversity of ponds within Stevenage, there is an opportunity to continue to develop an 'adopt a pond' scheme whereby local communities or businesses take responsibility for caring for their local ponds with guidance and support from experienced advisors. Advisors would work with the community and businesses to agree and prepare a pond management plan. This model has been extremely successful in the previous plan period, most notably at Poplars Pond.

5.1 Review of 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan

Habitat Action We1: Local Wildlife Sites

Of the 37 Local Wildlife Sites in Stevenage Borough only Ridlins Mire and Barnwell School are classified as wetland Local Wildlife Sites.

Recommendations

- Include appropriate policies within the Local Plan and other strategic documents to protect the Wetland Local Wildlife Sites from damage through development.

Review

The Local Plan was published in 2019, with appropriate actions having been undertaken on a large number of sites.

Habitat Action We2: Ridlins Mire

Ancient peat bog to the south of Ridlins Wood. The spring line formed up the slope of the site at a sand/clay contact causes run-off down the slope. Impeded drainage from the underlying clay has resulted in the development of a rheophilous ombrogenous bog. At the north end of the site a small domed peat mire has accumulated, a habitat type found nowhere else in Hertfordshire. There is a good wetland flora and several unusual plants have been recorded. The site is also important for invertebrates including a national rarity.

Recommendations

No recommended actions.

Review

Ridlins Mire remains in good condition with the key species still present. However, it is becoming increasingly rank with tall herbs, which will overshade and dominate the smaller fen species.

Habitat Action We3: Barnwell School

This pond is of a reasonable size and is maintained in good condition by the school. Great Crested Newts are known to be present. It has a good selection of floating, emergent and marginal vegetation and the only element missing for a completely well-balanced pond is submerged vegetation.

Recommendations

- To introduce some native submerged vegetation to enhance egg laying opportunities for amphibians.

Review

No access was available at the time of survey.

Habitat Actions We3-We5: Fairlands Valley Park Lakes

These lakes are a cascade of five lakes with water flowing from north to south. The most southerly of the five lakes (Main Lake) is a purpose-built recreational lake with sloping concrete or grassy banks with limited potential for improvement. The four other lakes have all improved significantly for wildlife in the time since the previous plan was written.

The Main Lake is used for water sports and angling. There are no islands on the lake and the edge is sloping concrete or grassy banks with limited emergent or marginal vegetation. Floating islands of vegetation have been introduced and are functioning well, however there have been anchoring problems and potential damage to the lake lining.

The boundaries of the Millennium Lake have developed a rich emergent and marginal flora, whilst retaining more formal areas to enable people to access the waterside. There are a large number of waterfowl present. Although feeding the ducks and geese will not be beneficial for the ecology of the lake it is clearly a popular exercise which enables people to interact with nature.

The Environment Lake has also benefitted from a change in management intensity. Thick emergent fringes to the lake have been allowed to develop and a broad rough grassland margin created on the western aspect.

No 2 is a long thin lake that has developed significantly in the time since the previous plan and now has a vigorous and diverse fringe of emergent and marginal vegetation, and a developing reed bed. Allowing this to develop has enhanced the wildlife and amenity value of the lake.

The most northerly waterbody (Balancing Pond) is designed to hold back storm water runoff for a short while to allow the settlement of the solids. The site periodically holds water and has developed into a marshy environment which supports good numbers and range of biodiversity. Its isolated, undisturbed nature and natural margins add to its value for wildlife.

The park lakes have developed into a great ecological asset for the town through implementing the recommendations of the previous plan. Fairlands Valley Park and its wetlands is an excellent area for wildlife and people. Many of the actions have taken place with significant benefits. Most water bodies have a diverse marginal vegetation.

Recommendations

- Main Lake: introduce marginal coir rolls.
- Designate Fairlands Valley Lakes 2-5 as a Local Nature Reserve.

Review

Coir rolls of marginal planting have been installed to the Main Lake and have developed well.

Habitat Actions We6-We12: Stevenage Golf Course Ponds

Pond 1 is in the middle of the fairway with Common Toad, Common Frog and Smooth Newt known to be present. Like many golf course ponds it is mown right down to the edges and has no emergent vegetation and minimal marginal vegetation. Large carp are also present in the lake, which muddy the water and eat any aquatic life including vegetation.

Pond 2 is to the side of the fairway, is silting up (and becoming dominated by self-set willows) and is gradually being shaded out by the bankside trees. Great Crested Newt and Common Frog are known to be present.

Pond 3 is at the edge of the fairway and is in fairly good condition with plenty of natural floating, emergent and marginal vegetation. Great Crested Newt, Smooth Newt, Common Toad and Common Frog are known to be present.

Pond 4 is relatively small shady pond away from the fairway and surrounded by trees. It has some emergent vegetation and a substantial amount of submerged Canadian pondweed. The southeast corner is silting up with soil washed down from the stream.

Recommendations

- Removal of carp from Pond 1
- Remove the willow and alder on northern bank and three crack willows at the eastern end of Pond 2.
- Introduce a less strict mowing regime on the banks of Pond 3.
- Remove silt from the southeast corner of Pond 4
- Consider stopping mowing within the out-of-bounds markers.

Review

The Council did remove carp from Pond 1 in 2018, but little progress with the other actions.

Habitat Action We13: Poplars Pond

Poplars Pond is a small pond with marginal, floating and submerged vegetation. Considerable litter collection and vegetation clearance has taken place in the previous plan period, invigorating the pond and resulting in the discovery of the Hertfordshire-rare, Opposite-leaved Pondweed.

Recommendations

- The pond has been adopted by the Scouts who should continue to carry out the management regime they have implemented with advice from HMWT.

Review

Pond looks in good condition. Regular management should continue.

Habitat Action We14: Towers Pond

The pond has succumbed to succession since being opened up in 1999/2000. After a third of the Reedmace was removed in 2016, further work was limited by lack of funds and accessibility issues. The pond now forms part of a wider town centre regeneration plan.

Recommendations

- Remove Reedmace

Review

This town centre pond is surrounded by mature trees of Oak, Hornbeam and Ash, with a mix of native and ornamental scrub. Natural succession of emergent vegetation, mainly Great Reedmace and Common Reed, has continued

Habitat Action We15-We16: Whomerley Wood Moat and Pond

The pond is in the middle of the moat in the northern section of Whomerley Woods. It is totally shaded out by tall mature trees and has no natural vegetation apart from a covering of duckweed. Due to its age and habitats, it is possible that the pond may contain some rare species of aquatic invertebrates. The large moat is totally shaded out by Hornbeam and Oak with no emergent vegetation and minimal marginal vegetation. From experience elsewhere, due to its antiquity, it is possible that the pond may contain some rare species of aquatic invertebrates.

Recommendations

- Employ the Freshwater Habitats Trust to undertake surveys of pond and moat to inform future management recommendations.

Review

Surveys were planned but the moat was dry.

Habitat Action We17: Whomerley Wood Six Hills Way

The Six Hills Way pond has a reasonably open aspect but is shaded by some mature trees behind the south bank. The pond also contains two introduced species of aquatic plants, Parrot's Feather and Water Soldier. Management should be concentrated on continuing the

Recommendations

- Coppice trees on the south side of the pond to let light into the pond and stimulate marginal and emergent plants. Coppice 1/3 of southern area each year on rotation.
- Clear vegetation from 1/3 of the middle of the pond each year to control the Parrots Feather and Water Soldier.

Review

The pond is in good condition, although it is uncertain if the invasive pondweeds have been eliminated as they were not visible at the time of the site visit. Coppicing of the southern bank in 2019 has opened up the pond. Willow Emerald damselflies have colonised.

Habitat Actions We18-We19: Monks Wood Ponds

The relatively small west pond in the middle of Monk's Wood was totally shaded by Oak and Hornbeam when the previous plan was drawn up. This should be continued so that 1/3 of trees in this area are coppiced every year on rotation. The trees around the east pond were coppiced as a result of recommendations made in the previous plan. It is important that the coppiced material is kept relatively short by re-coppicing regularly.

Recommendations

- Volunteers to coppice 1/3 of southern bankside trees each year.

Review

The ponds are in reasonable condition after trees on the south side of the ponds were coppiced to beneficial effect in 2019.

Habitat Action We20: Symonds Green Common Ponds

The previous plan recommended that the path between the two ponds be closed off. This path no longer appears to be present. The marginal plants on the edges of the ponds are vigorous but should be periodically controlled to prevent them from encroaching into the water.

Recommendations

- Smaller trees to the south and west of the pond should be coppiced on a three year rotation to stimulate the margins in that area and reduce leaf fall into the pond.

Review

Trees were coppiced in 2017 and vegetation cleared in 2019 and 2022.

Habitat Action We21: Fishers Green Pond

The pond has received some management in the previous plan period.

Recommendations

- Annual clearance of vegetation from within the pond to prevent succession and to coppice trees and cut back bramble from around the pond.

Review

The site will benefit from S106 investment in 2024/25 to help improve the pond and surrounds.

Habitat Action We22-We23: Ascot Crescent

The management of this pond over the previous plan period has had a transformatory effect. Its condition at this survey time was exemplary, so the advice is to continue to maintain the pond in this way.

Recommendations

- Continue with removal of invasive marginal plants.
- Pollard willows.
- Coppice small trees bordering the pond.

Review

Significant restorative efforts have been undertaken.

Habitat Action We24: Adopt-a-Pond Scheme

The adopt-a-pond scheme recommended in the previous plan was successful at Poplars Pond.

Recommendations

- Efforts to engage with local people and businesses bordering each of the other ponds should be made to attempt to reproduce the success of these schemes.

Review

An excellent scheme but unfortunately few ponds suitable, from a health and safety viewpoint.

Habitat Action We25: Chalk Rivers

The Borough's demand for water contributes to abstraction of water, which will affect the River Beane and its special wildlife. In partnership with Affinity Water, there should be a campaign to raise awareness of the effects of Stevenage's demand for water on this important chalk river.

Recommendations

- The town's residents and businesses should be encouraged to save water and thereby contribute to the conservation of Hertfordshire's chalk rivers.

Review

Partnership working with Affinity Water at events, where water saving devices have been distributed, and articles in The Chronicle have helped share the message. The Council has also removed the heavily water reliant seasonal bedding schemes from the roundabouts to set a sustainable example.

Habitat Action We26-We27: Stevenage Brook

All rivers are designated as Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitats under the UKBAP, provided that the "reaches are not heavily degraded with little scope for improvement, for example because they are heavily canalised". Although the Stevenage Brook has a significant number of issues, including water quality and modifications, it still fits within the scope of UKBAP Priority Habitat Description for Rivers.

The Stevenage Brook is covered by the Thames River Basin Management Plan (water body GB106038033310), which states that the river should reach Good Ecological Status (GES) by 2027. The reasons that the water body does not currently meet GES are phosphate levels and poor invertebrate abundance and diversity. Stevenage Brook currently first appears at Six Hills Way and then runs through Elder Way Flood Meadow, Broadwater Marsh, Stevenage Brook Marsh and finally leaves Stevenage Borough via the Stevenage Golf Course.

The phosphate levels and lack of invertebrate abundance and diversity are linked to a certain extent and river restoration can certainly play a major part in helping the brook improve in richness and diversity. This includes creating a range of habitats suitable for a range of invertebrates and fish species as well as using natural habitats to filter poor quality water. The condition of the water may also be improved by the provision of silt traps in the road drainage systems before they discharge into the brook.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that a study be carried out to investigate the potential for restoration of the Stevenage Brook.

Review

Restoration awaiting completion of modelling study by the Environment Agency. Daylighting works have been undertaken most years to open up light to the Brook and its banks to encourage riparian vegetation.

Habitat Action We28: Aston Valley Flood Storage

There is an opportunity to create a 'pondscape' within the Aston Valley Flood Storage Area. Digging a network of pools and scrapes here would add complexity to this environment and provide ideal conditions for wetland invertebrates such as dragonflies, without compromising the functionality of the site. This would lend itself to the creation of an interpreted 'Pond Discovery Trail', leading residents through the environment and highlighting the ecological benefits of the scheme.

Recommendations

- Approach the Environment Agency to explore the possibility of creating a pondscape at Aston Valley.

Review

Awaiting results of modelling survey by the Environment Agency.

Habitat Action W29: Wickes SUDS Scheme

There is a central engineered channel to a culvert in this drainage scheme. Removing this channel and digging some pools will enable flood waters to be retained in the area without compromising the functionality of the area.

Recommendations

- Approach the Environment Agency to explore the possibility of enhancement works at Wickes SUDS scheme.

Review

Awaiting results of modelling survey by the Environment Agency.

Habitat Action We30: Roebuck SUDS Scheme

This is a long straight heavily shaded drainage channel. It lacks any complexity and is simply to transfer water from one place to another as quickly as possible. There is no water storage element to it. Removing bankside vegetation, meandering the channel, digging pools and creating small dams to the flow of water will hold back the water in a sacrificial area and create good wildlife habitat. Approval will be required from the Environment Agency for these works and the others above.

Recommendations

- EA to be approached to investigate if they would be willing to be partners in an enhancement scheme.

Review

Awaiting results of modelling survey by the Environment Agency.

Habitat Action We31: Local Nature Reserves

Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are for both people and wildlife. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally and offer people special opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply enjoy it.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that that all the wetland sites listed above are assessed to determine if any are eligible for designation as a Local Nature Reserve.

Review

Ongoing, it is recommended that Fairlands Valley Park is designated as an LNR

5.2 Actions for Biodiversity 2024-2028: Wetlands

Action No.	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
WE1	Local Wildlife Sites	More strategic policies.Cutting regimes to maintain diverse marginal flora, management of pollutants & invasive non-native species.	SBC	Priority	Some creation of new habitats (ponds) and restoration of watercourses is required
WE2	Ridlins Mire (30/004)	Rotational cutting, consider grazing	SBC	Priority	
WE3	Barnwell School	Arrange survey			
WE4	FVP Main Lake	More rafts, if possible	SBC		
WE5	FVP Environment Lake	Extend grass buffer. Diversify scrub management.	SBC	Priority.	Consider additional viewing.
WE6	FVP Balancing Pond	Vegetation and scrub management.	SBC	Priority.	Consider viewing structure.
WE7	FVP No 2 Lake	Extend grass buffer. Diversify scrub management to enhance views.	SBC	Priority.	
WE8	Poplars Pond (30/009)	Continue management, increase buffer zone.	SBC	Priority.	HMWT advice required.
WE9	Towers Pond	Rotational clearance of emergent vegetation.	SBC		To be included in town centre regeneration plan.
WE10	Whomerley Wood Moat (29/040)	Open up by coppicing within boundary.	SBC		
WE11	Monks Wood Ponds (29/040)	Continue rotational management.	SBC		
WE12	Symonds Green Ponds (21/022)	Continue rotational management.	SBC	Priority.	
WE13	Fishers Green Pond	Continue rotational management.	SBC		Funding available
WE14	Ascot Crescent Pond	Continue rotational management.	SBC		
WE15	Chalk Rivers	Raise awareness through campaigns and SBC magazine The Chronicle	SBC		
WE16	Stevenage Brook	Study be carried out to investigate the potential for restoration.	SBC, EA	Priority	Continue with bankside vegetation works.
WE17	Aston Valley flood storage	Create pondscape with EA.	EA	Priority	Awaiting modelling study
WE18	Wickes SUDS Scheme	Enhancement works.	EA		Awaiting modelling study
WE19	Roebuck SUDS Scheme	Enhancement works	EA		Awaiting modelling study
WE20	Local Nature Reserves	Investigate potential LNRs, notably Fairlands Valley Park.	SBC	Priority	

6. Neighbourhood Nature

Overall objective: To maximise biodiversity in the urban environment by encouraging the design and use of our buildings, gardens and allotments to be sympathetic to the requirements of our wildlife.

Neighbourhood nature refers to the habitats and the species that inhabit them, in our cities, towns and villages – the places we call our home. Neighbourhood nature includes our gardens, local parks, schools and the green spaces surrounding our work places. For much of the time neighbourhood nature provides our main contact with wildlife. It provides the natural backdrop to our activities and enriches our lives at all levels.

Wildlife is everywhere. Some form of natural life is present in almost every environment on earth. In our towns and cities, wildlife is present despite the actions of the human population rather than because of them. It is not always recognised that the value of urban wildlife to biodiversity conservation can be as great as that in the countryside. Great value is also found in the effects it has on the people who encounter it. These effects are not easily quantified but are increasingly understood to be of considerable benefit. Everyday contact with wildlife can lead to an increasing appreciation of nature conservation, as well as environmental policies in general.

Yet there has been an almost unconscious view that nature should not exist in such places. Neighbourhood nature is often perceived of as untidy, unhealthy, weeds or vermin. Recently however, there has been a change in attitudes towards our urban habitats. The challenge now is to take these ideas forward in order to maximise the benefits for both wildlife and people who share these neighbourhoods. It is probably not widely recognised, that to many forms of wildlife, buildings can appear similar to natural habitats such as cliffs and caves. Kestrels and Peregrine Falcons frequently nest on our churches and tower blocks and bats, Swifts, House Sparrows and Starlings are quick to make use of holes under eaves, particularly in old buildings.

The need people feel for contact with nature together with a growing interest in the environment, and increases in leisure time, have been reflected by the recent popularity of wildlife gardening. In addition to private gardens, the grounds of schools, community centres, retail parks, business parks and housing developments are being cared for with nature in mind. Gardens are generally a mosaic of small habitats formed by lawns, shrubberies, rockeries, old trees, vegetable patches, fruit trees and bushes, hedges, walls, ponds, compost heaps, and the houses and other buildings. It is this variety of habitat that is a key factor in creating the richness of the garden ecosystem. The feeding of garden birds is an increasingly popular activity. Many garden birds are adaptable and their ability to utilise new habitats and food sources is a key aspect of their ecology. Suburban gardens are believed to support the highest density of breeding birds of any habitat in Britain. The regular breeding birds of suburbia are mostly those of scrub and

open woodland, presumably because the patchwork of garden habitats resembles the richest of woodland margins.

Garden ponds have turned out to be ideal habitats for several amphibians. Amphibians in general like dense vegetation around part of the perimeter of the pond. The abundance of such habitats in suburbia, together with a fair amount of introduction, has enabled Common Frogs and Smooth Newts to become widespread in urban areas. Even allotments can play an important role. The open spaces provided by allotments can provide a significant wildlife resource in urban areas. Many species of birds will breed or feed in such areas. Compost heaps will support a variety of invertebrates and not infrequently, Slow Worms and Grass Snakes benefit from the habitat mosaics created there.

By far the greatest threat to the urban environment is the continual demand for more of it. The demand for more housing, offices and factories results in the loss of more greenbelt or infill on brownfield sites within our towns. In some respects the loss of brownfield sites has a more adverse effect on wildlife than the loss of green belt, which is very often arable farmland land with little wildlife value. In reality it will not be possible to stop or slow down the demand for new buildings and therefore it is more appropriate to divert our energies into ensuring that our urban environment is tailored to maximise its biodiversity potential.

The design and construction of modern buildings has seriously reduced the breeding and roosting sites for both birds and bats. Even on older buildings these sites are being lost due to repairs or restoration work. It is therefore important to influence the design of new buildings to provide suitable nesting and roosting sites and to retrospectively introduce such sites to existing buildings.

Fortunately, gardening for wildlife and the provision of garden ponds is on the increase and in some instances results in wildlife populations higher than those found in the countryside where their natural habitat is being lost. However, with a little guidance just minor changes to the design of wildlife gardens and ponds it is possible to increase the biodiversity value considerably. Similarly allotments provide an attractive habitat for some forms of wildlife but with just a little extra effort, could provide ideal habitats for creature such as slow worms and grass snakes.

Therefore, the key to maximising biodiversity in the urban environment is not to oppose the relentless spread of urbanisation, but to ensure that the requirements of our wildlife are built into its design and that the Borough's residents are made aware of how to encourage wildlife into their homes and gardens.

6.1 Review of 2017-2022 Biodiversity Action Plan

Habitat Action N1: Exeter Close

Of the 37 Wildlife Sites in Stevenage Borough only Exeter Close is classified as a neighbourhood Local Wildlife Site. The houses and the nearby Wellfield Wood are an important area for bats.

Recommendations

- Ensure that Local Wildlife Site policies in the Local Plan and other strategic documents recognise and protect the Exeter Close Wildlife Site from damage through development.

Review

Local Plan published in 2019.

Habitat Actions N2-N6: Buildings

In the past the construction of buildings was such that there were open eaves, loose tiles and holes in the walls, all of which provided both nesting and roosting habitats for bats and birds. However with modern construction techniques eaves are fitted sealed or with grilles, tiles are fitted with no gaps and walls are built with no holes. The situation is made worse by the fact that even on old buildings nesting and roosting sites are being lost due to repairs and restoration work. For some species such as the Swift this has had a devastating effect on their populations. Stevenage's buildings could be more biodiverse through the inclusion of features to benefit nesting and feeding birds and roosting bats. The inclusion of 'green or brown' roofs on buildings, along with spaces for birds and bats should be a priority in light of declining populations of all bats and some urban birds.

The screaming of Swifts in early May is a real sign that summer has arrived. Swifts have all-dark plumage, narrow scythe-shaped wings and on a very close view reveal a pale throat. They spend most of the year on the wing, only touching down at the nest site during the summer. They even 'roost' on the wing! However, because of the loss of their breeding sites their population has dropped by 40% in the last 15 years (Swift Conservation). There are a number of ways of preserving and increasing the number of nest sites:

- Preserve existing nesting sites in old buildings.
- Ensure that there is provision for nesting sites in new-build designs.
- Retrospectively provide nest sites in existing buildings by modifying the design or installing nest boxes.

There are Swift colonies in Stevenage Old Town and it was proposed in the previous BAP to instigate a plan to not only safeguard the existing nesting birds but also attempt to get them to expand into adjacent areas.

Recommendations

- Identify the Swift colonies in Old Stevenage and carry out a census of the nesting pairs.
- Engage with and encourage local residents and businesses in the area of the colony to preserve the existing nest sites and to create new sites.
- Encourage local residents and businesses adjacent to the study area to incorporate nest sites into their buildings.
- Through development management, seek to incorporate Swift nesting spaces in new buildings both in and around the existing breeding colony and across the rest of Stevenage.
- Carry out an annual survey for nesting Swifts in the main colonies and adjacent areas.
- The previous plan recommended a Swift Action Plan with Stevenage Homes Ltd. (SHL) to ensure Swift's needs were considered when new housing was planned or repairs are made to existing stock.

Review

Swift nesting boxes were installed to properties in Walkern Road as part of the wider Major Refurbishment Contract to council properties. Funding has been agreed, for five years, to enable the continued purchase and installation of nest boxes as part of this programme. Nest boxes were also installed to the maternity unit at Lister Hospital.

Habitat Action N7-N8: Gardens

Gardening for wildlife has been with us for some time now but to many it is still just a matter of planting a fruit-bearing plant, a butterfly bush and a sunflower. However, with very little extra effort it is possible to significantly increase the attractiveness of a garden to wildlife. The kinds of plants we choose can have a profound influence on biodiversity. A diverse range of plants will, in general, lead to a diverse range of visiting animals.

With a few guidelines, it is possible to enhance the wildlife garden into one that has a significantly improved biodiversity and provides some habitats that are disappearing from our countryside.

Recommendations

- Include guidance on wildlife gardening in each issue of the Borough's magazine, the Chronicle.

Review

Some early awareness raising has taken place via The Chronicle and the council's web pages, but may have dwindles in recent times.

Habitat Action N9: Garden Ponds

Garden ponds have been with us for a long time and are fortunately becoming more popular. Apart from providing a tranquil feature in any garden, they also provide a home to a selection of aquatic creatures, including amphibians, dragonflies and insects. However, it is important to distinguish between an ornamental pond and a wildlife pond. Ornamental ponds are frequently designed with fish in mind and therefore often have filtration systems and are kept meticulously tidy.

Whilst ornamental ponds are an attractive feature of any garden, wildlife ponds provide a much more varied habitat and therefore significantly contribute to increased biodiversity. The recommended action from the previous plan was to

Recommendations

- Publish a Wildlife Pond article in the Council's publication "Chronicle".

Review

Some early awareness raising has taken place via The Chronicle and the council's web pages, but may have dwindles in recent times.

Habitat Action N10: Allotments

Allotments are more like farmland cultivated by traditional means than gardens as they are labour intensive and are probably subjected to less application of herbicide and pesticide. No matter how well cultivated allotments are, there are always overgrown areas on unoccupied plots, margins and unused corners. These areas are left to develop naturally and provide ideal habitat for a variety of wildlife.

Even parts of the plots that are in use can be set aside or a small pond dug and can benefit from the guidelines given for gardens and garden ponds. Also, as allotments are generally out of view from the house more extreme measures can be considered such as laying down a large sheet of corrugated iron, either on unused areas or on areas that are left fallow. Many allotment holders used these sheets as a matter of course to suppress weeds on sections that they propose to sow the following year. The warm ground below these sheets are attractive to cold-blooded creatures such as Slow Worms and Grass Snakes.

Recommendations

- Liaise with the Stevenage Gardens and Allotments Association to raise awareness.
- Publish an article on managing allotments for wildlife in the Council's publication "Chronicle".

Review

Some early awareness raising has taken place.

6.2 Actions for Biodiversity 2024-2028: Neighbourhood Nature

Action No.	Site (LWS Ref)	Action	By Whom	Funding/ priority	Comment
NN1	Exeter Close (22/036)	Ensure SBC policies protect Local Wildlife Sites.	SBC	Priority	Local Plan published in 2019
NN2	Buildings	SBC policy to see Swift bricks on all new buildings.	SBC	Priority	Continue with current action.
NN3	Gardens	Include guidance on gardening in the SBC magazine, the Chronicle.	SBC		
NN4	Garden Ponds	Include articles on ponds in the SBC magazine, the Chronicle.	SBC		
NN5	Allotments	Include guidance on allotments in the SBC magazine, the Chronicle.	SBC		

7. A ‘Wilder Stevenage’

7.1 Introduction – the State of Nature

Wildlife globally, nationally and locally is in trouble. There has clearly been a rapidly growing public awareness of the climate change crisis we face but this perhaps has partially overshadowed the linked and equally catastrophic biodiversity crisis.

The Hertfordshire State of Nature report (HMWT, 2020), builds on work done nationally in producing the UK State of Nature Partnership’s reports in 2013, 2016 and 2019 . It follows the principle that species are the fundamental building blocks of our ecosystems and we regard them as the basic measure of how nature is faring. Whilst the key issues identified in the national State of Nature reports are relevant to Hertfordshire, some issues are of greater importance in our local context than others. The report provides a summary of changes in wildlife specific to Hertfordshire and aims to further understand how we should focus conservation efforts in the county. The report therefore does not simply rely on national conservation status of species but combines these with the latest local knowledge on species conservation status and distribution changes specific to Hertfordshire. Through this work, a new dataset of Hertfordshire Species of Conservation Concern has been produced.

In conjunction with the national State of Nature reports and the IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services, the Hertfordshire State of Nature report shows us that we are living in a biodiversity emergency. For the first time, we are able to understand how Hertfordshire fits with the national picture of nature conservation and what contribution it can make towards addressing the global crisis.

Biodiversity provides us with an irreplaceable wealth of services, such as clean air, water, food, flood protection and many others that we cannot live without. We depend on biodiversity – our wildlife – for our own life-support. It is important for our economy, health, wellbeing and quality of life. Despite these facts, there is not yet enough public awareness of the alarming rate at which we are losing our biodiversity, and the impacts this is increasingly going to have on us. Moreover, the science is now clear that biodiversity loss and climate change are inextricably linked and to tackle one we need to also tackle the other.

In the last 50 years, 76 species (1% of those assessed) became extinct in Hertfordshire; more than three species every two years. Of these, 35 were invertebrates, 26 were plants, 13 were vertebrates and 2 were lichens. A total of 1,446 species (19% of those assessed) are currently threatened with extinction in Hertfordshire. This includes over 1,000 invertebrates and 260 plants.

The remaining 80% of species were classed as Lower Risk and were not selected as Hertfordshire Species of Conservation Concern. However, the risk level varies within this group, and for some species may be quite high, but these would have been difficult to distinguish between in a consistent enough way amongst different taxonomic groups with the available data and knowledge. Therefore, the importance of conserving these species should not be undervalued.

7.2 Working in Partnership

Hertfordshire is served by the County Council, 10 district and borough councils, 11 town councils and 102 parish councils. Many of these authorities own and manage land. There are 870 ha of land within Local Nature Reserves, which the declaring authority either owns or has some legal interest in. These are managed primarily for nature conservation and people's enjoyment of wildlife. However, local authorities own many other areas of land of high potential to benefit wildlife including road verges, greenspaces and land managed for a commercial income. All of these have the potential to contribute towards nature's recovery.

Parks, cemeteries and allotments are some of the most important urban features for wildlife and the most important places for those species doing disproportionately well in urban areas, such as Hedgehogs and pollinating insects. Due to insect pollinators' relatively small functional requirements – habitat range, life cycle and nesting behaviour – pollinators put high-priority and high-impact urban conservation within reach. In a rapidly urbanising world, transforming how environmental managers view towns and cities can improve people's engagement and contribute to the development of more sustainable urbanisation.

Many areas of land owned by local authorities, particularly amenity grassland greenspaces, are managed primarily for recreational public benefit but often are not managed with enough consideration given to enhancing biodiversity. This is a missed opportunity because biodiversity provides major complementary public benefits of its own. Greenspaces in urban areas could be some of the most effective places to provide health and wellbeing benefits from wildlife to people because of their proximity to human populations. In many cases, local authorities can better optimise public benefits on greenspaces by giving further weight and consideration to biodiversity-based objectives.

Stevenage Borough Council has lead by example, working with local communities and the Wildlife Trust. A five year Biodiversity Action Plan for Stevenage Borough covering the period June 2010 – June 2015 inclusive was prepared in response to the updated Hertfordshire Biodiversity Plan. It updated an earlier Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan that was drafted in 2004. The work achieved locally through the action plan contributed to targets set for the county through the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan. The results of the work in Stevenage were captured and reported through the national Biodiversity Action Reporting System, co-ordinated in Hertfordshire by the Biodiversity Officer. The highly successful 'Wild Stevenage' partnership project between SBC and HMWT was crucial in raising awareness of the benefits, for example, of altered mowing regimes.

The 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Biodiversity Summit in Nagoya resulted in the publication of a new strategy and set of targets for signatory governments. In light of this and the Government's new focus for biodiversity conservation, the UK BAP was replaced in July 2012 with the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. Although the BAP was replaced the focus and targets it identified continue to be relevant today in identifying conservation priorities for the county. The Plan was developed alongside other strategic plans in Stevenage – the *So Stevenage Strategy* and the emerging *Green Spaces Strategy*.

7.3 Climate Change Adaptation

The impact of climate change is visible all around us. In the natural world it is particularly evident as species change their distribution patterns in response to the changing climate conditions. Adapting to these climate changes as best we can is now a key part of nature conservation. Whilst it is difficult to be precise about climate in the future, the general trends are clear and for areas away from the coast we should expect the following:

- An increased frequency of storms and extreme weather, with a higher intensity of rainfall and the likelihood of flooding events.
- Longer drier periods with more prolonged droughts.
- Increased average temperatures with longer growing seasons.
- Species distributions moving within their ideal climate 'envelope'.

A range of adaptation measures can be considered, those relevant to the key habitats in Stevenage are listed in Table 6 and summarised below. They are focused on three key areas: **resistance** (buffer or protect from change, refugia), **resilience** (return to normal conditions after climate disturbance) and **transition** (actively predict and promote change).

Woodland

- Maximise diversity of habitat structure, and species complexity.
- Enhance woodland resilience and dynamic processes, by mimicking natural processes through woodland management where appropriate eg coppicing, thinning and group felling.
- Facilitating woodland expansion through natural regeneration.
- Connect and buffer to form ecologically functioning landscapes, facilitating the dispersal of species, by:
    - » Acquiring key areas of complementary land, such as grasslands and scrub, to form connected land or 'stepping-stones'.
    - » Soften existing woodland edges by acquiring suitable land to naturally regenerate to scrub/woodland.

Grassland

- Diversify grassland structures through good cutting regimes.
- *Increase area of habitat, through restoration or re-creation, developing networks of habitat.
- Increase complementary habitats - scrub mosaics.

Wetland

- Manage pollutant loads to minimise impact on natural nutrient status.
- Restore and maintain natural hydrological regimes – good dynamic management.
- Structural and species diversity in vegetation types, for example, pond shorelines with a mosaic of trees and emergent vegetation.
- Maintain early successional wetland habitats in good condition.
- Good biosecurity to slow the spread of invasive non-native species.

Climate change adaptation measures for key habitats in Stevenage

	Resistance - buffer/protect from change, increase refugia	Resilience - return to normal conditions after disturbance	Transition - actively predict and promote change
Strategy	**Identify, maintain or create refugia. Increase buffering from extremes.**	**Reduce risk and impact of climate disturbances**	**Facilitate change through species transition. Create stepping stones and create habitat in predicted locations.**
Woodlands	* Diversify scrub-by structure. * Maintain full range of successional states, from regenerating scrub, to veterans and decaying wood. * Soften woodland edges. * Increase decaying wood component.	* Diversify tree and shrub species. * Manage complementary habitats, such as ponds, grass or scrub, to connect land. * Increase water retention by damming ditches/creating pools.	* Increase key habitat blocks to maximise complementary management. * Facilitate expansion through natural regeneration/planting on a variety of aspects.
Hedgerows	* Buffer against impact of adjacent land use. * Regenerate trees and shrubs to create greater range of age class.	* When planting or restocking, aim to diversify the range of species and select species and provenances adapted to a wider range of climatic conditions.	* Maintenance of a diverse range of hedgerow structures through appropriate management. *Establish new hedges, aim to provide links to the existing patches of habitat.
Grasslands	* Ensure best practice management. * Identify potential refugia through microtopography and aspect. *Diversify grassland structures.	*Increase area of habitat, through restoration or re-creation. *Increase complementary habitats - scrub mosaics. *Maintain 'cool' north facing slopes.	*Develop networks of habitat. *Predict and accept where necessary, changes to habitat. * Introduce flexible grazing where possible.
Wetlands	*Maintain full range of successional states & diversity of habitat structure. *Maintain ditch & pool networks to accommodate high & low water levels. *Promote good biosecurity to slow spread of invasive non-native species.	*Increase size and diversity of wetland. *Dynamic management - restore & maintain natural hydrological regimes. *Consider long term water availability, through storage & up to date water control structures. *Manage pollutants to minimise impact on natural nutrient status.	*Create habitat for colonising species by diversifying habitats where possible. *Transition to more sustainable habitats where appropriate. *Ensure flexibility in grazing regimes to adapt to varying conditi ons.

7.4 A 'Wilder Stevenage'

A large amount has been achieved in Stevenage over the years in terms of environmental enhancement. Walking through the green spaces in late summer with their masses of flowers and accompanying insects is a delight. The woodlands in spring are a mass of colour. Areas such as Fairlands Valley Park are delightfully 'wild' and people are clearly enjoying the environment. But now we need to move forwards again.

This review updates the actions from the last BAP within the series of habitat action plans. Beyond these actions, this review aims to promote a more strategic approach in these key habitats; an approach that will contribute towards climate change adaptation. More linking of habitats in priority areas through joined up management plans. Softening of boundaries between wood and grass through imaginative cutting regimes and buffer zone development.

Delivering these actions will not be easy. However, a dedicated officer resource to help promote and steer the work is recommended. Working in partnership with others will always be key, particularly involving local residents in projects, a strategy that has already achieved notable results. A summary of high level actions is provided in the table below.

Summary and monitoring actions for a 'Wilder Stevenage' 2023-2028

Action No./ Site	Action		By When	Success criteria
WS1 Policies	Key environmental policies to be updated as listed in the action plans.	SBC	2024	Policies published.
WS2 Grasslands	Seek to deliver Grassland Action Plan, notably diversifying cutting regimes, developing networks of habitat and softening grass/ wood margins.	SBC	2028	Annual reports to Steering Group
WS3 Woodlands	Seek to deliver Woodland Action Plan, notably through a timber extraction agreement in prioritised woodland blocks.	SBC	2028	Annual reports to Steering Group
WS4 Wetlands	Seek to deliver Wetland Action Plan, notably through enhancement schemes to diversify watercourses and wetland areas.	SBC	2028	Annual reports to Steering Group
WS5 LNRs	Look to designate new LNRs, eg Fairlands Valley Park, improving facilities that enhance visitor enjoyment of the environment.	SBC	2026	Designation.
WS6 A 'Wilder Stevenage' Project Officer	Seek to employ a dedicated Project Officer to help deliver these actions.	SBC	2024	Project Officer in post.
WS7 Funding	Seek funding opportunities to deliver the actions.	SBC	2023-2028	Funding achieved.
WS8 Community involvement	To work in partnership with the local community and other key players such as the EA, Wildlife Trust, to help deliver projects on the ground.	SBC	2028	Annual reports to Steering Group.

8. Appendices: Local Wildlife Sites

Site Ref	Site Name
21/018	Margarets Wood, Todds Green
21/021	Fishers Green Meadow
21/022	Symonds Green
21/024	Whitney Wood
21/025	St Nicholas Churchyard
21/026	Martins Way, A1072
21/047	Whitney Wood Drive
21/048	Almond Spring
21/049	Fishers Green Wood
22/002	Sishes Wood
22/004	Martins Wood
22/005	Wellfield Wood
22/036	Exeter Close
22/041	Hanginghill Wood
29/018	Kitching Green Lane
29/020	Garson Meadow
29/021	Watery Grove
29/022	Norton Green
29/034	Monks Wood West
29/038	Broadwater Marsh
29/039	Warren Springs
29/040	Monks & Whomerley Woods
29/041	Shackledell Grassland
29/042	Six Hills Common
29/046	Pasture South of Watery Grove, Cannocks Wood Field
29/059	Triangular Grassland by Fairlands Valley Park
29/065	Elder Way Flood Meadows
30/002	Loves Wood
30/003	Ridlins Wood
30/004	Ridlins Mire
30/005	Stevenage Brook Marsh
30/009	Poplars Meadow & Pond
30/028	Ashtree Wood & Abbotts Grove
30/041	Marymead Spring
30/043	Great Collens Wood
30/045	Pestcotts Spring & Wood
30/046	Blacknells Spring
30/047	Wiltshires Spring
30/051	Valley Way Wood
30/052	Elm Green Pastures

Stevenage
BOROUGH COUNCIL