



Open Spaces
Biodiversity Policy
2023-2027
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Introduction

Windlesham Parish Council (WPC) manage memorial gardens, playgrounds, open spaces, allotments, cemeteries and one Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This policy considers how to maintain and enhance biodiversity across WPC's open spaces in order to maximise gains for wildlife across the area.

General principles

1. Maintain and enhance existing wildlife-rich habitats.

It is important to protect and enhance areas within WPC that are already benefiting wildlife. These include the SSSI site at High Curley as well as other undesignated areas which have the potential of being relatively wildlife-rich or buffer wildlife-rich sites. For example, the woodland copse at College Ride, Bagshot, School Lane Field, Bagshot, Windmill Field, Windlesham, Mill Pond, Windlesham, as well as the cemeteries across the parish.

There are lengths of native hedgerows at a number of sites. These are high value for biodiversity and are a national Biodiversity Action Plan habitat. WPC's high value hedgerows will be sensitively managed with wildlife in mind. There will be no significant hedge works on hedges during the bird breeding season, and their cutting regimes will be managed to reduce impact where this does not impact on public access or amenity.

Trees are also an extremely valuable habitat for wildlife both as standards and copses. Trees across the WPC land are retained where possible. If trees are lost through natural causes or are felled for safety reasons, these will be replaced with appropriate species.

2. Create new habitats.

Increasing the amount and types of available habitat benefits wildlife. WPC will seek opportunities to create new habitats such as wildflower meadows, native hedges and log piles. Where appropriate, vegetation within existing habitats can be diversified by adding wildflowers, long grass areas, shrubs and trees. Even something as simple as incorporating areas of long grass creates new habitats such as long hollow stems and seed heads. Allowing natural processes to occur also creates new habitats. For example, winter die back of herbaceous plants provides overwintering habitat for invertebrates, whilst leaving standing or fallen deadwood (where it doesn't impact public safety) provides valuable habitat for fungi and invertebrates.

3. Reduce pesticide and herbicide use.

Insects and weeds are biodiversity - they make up the vast majority of the species found across our sites, and they are food for other groups of animals such as birds. Pesticides are indiscriminate and will kill organisms other than their targets and can also accumulate in animals that eat sprayed insects. Similarly, herbicides can affect non-target species through direct accidental spraying or by drifting in

the air. Biodiversity in our open spaces will benefit from minimising pesticide and herbicide use. However, in some instances (for example controlling non-native invasive species and keeping paths safe) there is currently no viable alternative. In these situations, the minimal possible amount of herbicide will be safely and carefully applied. WPC are currently trialling the use of horticultural vinegar, have invested in a 'weed wiper' machine and will continue to investigate new technologies as they emerge.

4. Schedule vegetation clearance to avoid nesting birds.

Breeding birds and their nests are protected by law. WPC will continue to avoid vegetation clearance and tree works during the bird breeding season from March to September. During the 'shoulders' of the season, vegetation will be checked prior to starting work because climate change is altering nesting times.

5. Remove invasive non-native plants.

Fortunately, there are limited occurrences of non-native plant species on WPC land. WPC will continue to remove non-native species, such as Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed where they are found and ensure they do not spread onto neighbouring land, as required by Defra.

6. Engage the public.

It is important to keep the public well informed when making changes for biodiversity in public areas, both to retain their support and as an opportunity to increase their awareness. For example, when leaving grass uncut to allow wildflowers to thrive, educational signs can help mitigate any impression of neglect. WPC will consult the public when undertaking biodiversity enhancement projects and will offer opportunities for public involvement where appropriate and resources allow.

WPC will endeavour to encourage more people into green spaces through communications (press and social media) and by working with the Community Groups to organise events and activities in the recreational spaces.

Habitat Specific Principles

1. GRASSLAND

The majority of the land managed by WPC is grassland. This includes amenity grassland, play areas and wildflower areas.

1.1 Amenity grassland

WPC maintain a number of amenity grassland sites. These are regularly cut and of very low value to biodiversity. These habitats support grassland invertebrates in low numbers (in comparison to long grass) and provide limited foraging resource for birds, mammals and other predators that feed on grassland invertebrates. Where these sites are heavily used for recreation, such as football pitches there are few options to enhance biodiversity.

However, WPC will seek opportunities for enhancement in those areas which are less heavily used. These include:

- Changing the mowing regime on site or part of the site to allow longer grass and any flowers to grow – this more diverse structure will increase habitat and food sources for invertebrates and their predators. Leaving a buffer strip of long grass along hedges, boundaries and around trees (at least 50 cm) where it does not impact the amenity value of sites.
- Leaving a proportion of long grass over the winter to allow cover for overwintering invertebrates.
- Enhancing areas of grassland by introducing wildflowers or spreading with species rich green hay and managing as a meadow.
- Allowing scrub areas to develop in areas of amenity grassland, providing food and habitat for invertebrates, birds and mammals.

Leaving areas of amenity grassland uncut provides food and habitat for insects. It is important to keep the public informed of changes both to gain support and to increase their awareness.

1.2 Wildlife-rich grassland

Wildlife-rich grasslands are extremely valuable for wildlife but have undergone a catastrophic decline over the past century. These grasslands provide food and habitat to a high diversity of invertebrates, in turn supporting greater numbers of predators, such as birds and mammals. Wildflower meadows are particularly wildlife rich, supporting an array of pollinators, such as bees and butterflies.

WPC currently have two created wildflower meadow areas: part of Bagshot Cemetery and part of Windmill Field.

- These areas will be managed as meadows, with an early cut and then left until the flowers have set seed later in the summer. The meadow then needs to be cut and the arisings removed. The sites may need some reseeded/over-sowing depending on species composition. Meadow areas will be expanded where funding and capacity allows using seed or green hay.
- The mowing regimes of these sites will be altered to allow wildflowers to thrive and set seed. They will then be cut in the autumn and the arisings removed. These areas can also be enhanced with supplementary sowing/planting and expanded where practical.
- Scrub and bramble will be controlled where it is encroaching onto valuable grassland.

1.3 Naturalised bulbs in grass

Naturalised bulbs, such as snowdrop and crocus, provide a flush of colour and interest for grasslands in spring. These habitats are of medium value to biodiversity as they provide a range of vegetation structures, and pollen and nectar early in the season.

WPC will increase plant species diversity by planting native spring-flowering wildflower bulbs.

2. SHRUB BEDS

The value of shrub beds to biodiversity depends on the species used. Most shrubs are high valuable to biodiversity due to the range of structures and habitat niches they provide (e.g. woody stems, foliage at varying height from the ground, flowers, seed heads/hips/berries). Shrubs with lots of flowers and a long flowering period are good for pollinators, especially if they flower early or late in the season when pollen and nectar sources are in short supply. WPC will adhere to the following guidelines for shrub beds:

- Consider wildlife value when planting new shrubs using flowering and fruiting shrubs that provide food sources for wildlife.
- Reduce intensive trimming of shrubs where appropriate, allowing a variety of shrub heights to develop.
- Consider replacing mulch and cultivated soil with herbaceous groundcover or woodland wildflowers.
- Add structure to shrub beds by planting single standard trees in appropriate places.
- Leave woody cuttings in piles within the shrub bed to create deadwood habitat.

3. FLOWER BEDS

Flower beds create a visual spectacle and can be of high biodiversity value if they contain a variety of nectar rich flowers. WPC will:

- Increase species and structural diversity within the bed.
- Select plants which encourage pollinators or have other wildlife benefits.
- Select species for future plantings that do not need protection from slugs to survive, thereby avoiding the need to use slug pellets. Also consider plants resistance to pests and diseases, which may require spraying.
- Retain dead seed heads and skeletons of dead plants where practical and where it does not impact visual amenity, leaving to stand over winter for seed-eating birds and winter invertebrate shelter and strimming in late winter or spring. Signage can be used to explain to the public why this is being carried out.

4. PONDS

Water features are of great value to biodiversity, however there are very few under WPC management. The pond at School Lane Field, Bagshot has value to wildlife and will be maintained to promote the existing ecosystem.

5. HEDGES

Hedgerows are a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) and creating and enhancing hedges will be of high value to biodiversity if they are well-managed and species-rich. They act like long linear woodland edges to provide shade, shelter and a range of habitat niches within a small

area. Hedges within the WPC area include native hedge boundaries in various management conditions. WPC will:

- Reduce frequency of cutting in native hedgerows where it does not impact the visual amenity or safety of the site. WPC will promote a more varied structure by aiming to cut once every two or three years or by cutting only one side of a hedge each year.
- Identify hedges needing restoration work (gapping up, coppicing) and those that will be left to grow out – both of which are valuable for wildlife.
- Increase the diversity of single-species hedges by incorporating a range of native hedging species or including flowering and fruiting species.
- Create a buffer strip of biodiversity grass or meadow extending 2 metres from the base of the hedge where possible.
- Allow trees to grow up within the hedge.

6. TREES

6.1 Wooded areas

Copses and wooded areas are of high value to biodiversity mainly due to having a huge range of habitat niches. An area of trees can support many more species than the same area of any other park habitat. WPC has wooded copses at College Ride, Bagshot; Lightwater Cemetery and High Curley, Lightwater.

WPC will consider the following options for trees:

- Where there is dense tree cover, allow glades and pathways to increase sunlight reaching the ground which will stimulate undergrowth.
- Leave logs, prunings and other dead wood in place to decompose or create nearby log piles, including standing dead wood where it does not pose a risk to the public or compromise the visual amenity of a site.
- Introduce woodland wildflowers and ground flora.
- Create a buffer strip of long grass around the edge of copses and under trees where possible.
- Maintain a shrub understorey and encourage trees to regenerate naturally.
- Develop a wide range of tree ages and sizes from young regeneration to standing damaged or dead trees.

6.2 Single standard trees

Single trees can be of great value to biodiversity if allowed to mature and reach a good size. Tree species which flower and produce fruit are valuable to pollinators in summer and birds in winter. WPC will:

- Leave grass uncut underneath single trees, to a radius of 50 cm or more where viable. Trees with dedication plaques will continue to be strimmed, as will some trees in formal gardens.
- Plant bulbs underneath single trees to provide spring colour where resources allow.

- Encourage or introduce wildflowers underneath single trees to maintain display after bulb flowering.
- Leave dead wood in place on trees unless it poses a safety risk.
- Install bat or bird boxes where appropriate to increase nesting habitat, bearing in mind the need for bird box maintenance.

7. PLAY AREAS

These are of low value to biodiversity but there are opportunities to enhance them for wildlife, which can make them more engaging for young people and provide some natural play opportunities.

- Install bat and insect boxes where appropriate.
- If resources allow, to incorporate planting trees/shrubs into play areas, whilst having regard for safety and vandalism considerations.
- Consider creating natural play features with logs, sticks for den making or water.

8. DEADWOOD AREAS

Standing and fallen deadwood are important habitats for a huge range of invertebrates and fungi. Deadwood includes fallen branches, felled trees, log piles, dead branches on living trees and standing dead trees. The recreational use of WPC Parks and aesthetic sensibilities of the public (as well as health and safety) will limit our opportunities to create deadwood habitats, however, in less used or visible areas we will consider the following options:

- Leave some dead trees and shrubs standing (whilst having regard to both health & safety and aesthetics)
- Leave some old tree and shrub stumps to decay naturally.
- Create log piles from cuttings of various thicknesses, leave in contact with the ground, in light shade, and in a compact pile.

9. ALLOTMENTS

WPC manage 52 allotments at Hook Mill Lane. Allotments are ideal places for biodiversity. The sheer number and density of different plants and habitats brings a huge diversity of invertebrates, birds and other wildlife.

Allotment holders can be encouraged to garden in a wildlife friendly way. For example, delaying the winter tidy up until March will retain dry plant stems and seed heads, which provide winter food for birds and places to rest and hibernate for invertebrates. Allotment holders can also be encouraged to avoid peat and pesticides, provide water for birds and leave some plants to bolt to provide extra flowers for pollinators.

The common areas of WPC allotments provide opportunities to create new habitats to benefit wildlife. WPC allotments need to be assessed for potential biodiversity enhancements which could include the following.

- Affix bat and bird boxes to mature trees. Consider an owl box where they are present (e.g. Green Lane).
- Create habitat piles using stones and dead wood. This will be used by many different invertebrates and maybe frogs or hedgehogs. Compost heaps are also good habitats for wildlife.

Conclusion

Whilst the priority for the WPC is to provide safe, aesthetically pleasing recreational spaces for the community, a wealth of research indicates that spending time with nature benefits people's health and wellbeing. Enhancing WPC's sites for wildlife will therefore help both mitigate the biodiversity crisis and will also benefit the users of the sites. Keeping the public informed and engaging them, where possible, ensures increased public support and wider benefits. WPC will strive to continue to enhance its open spaces to benefit both people and wildlife into the future.