



## 6.1 Built-up Areas and Gardens Habitat Action Plan

### VISION

Every private garden, allotment, churchyard and office grounds to include space for wildlife. For example: uncut grass and improved use of flower beds and bushes for wildflowers and butterflies, log piles for fungi and insects and compost heaps for hibernating mammals.

### KEY FACTS

#### What have we got?

Existing Urban Areas make up roughly 25% of Swindon Borough with a vast majority of that area within the urban footprint of Swindon Town. Each small, individual site provides an isolated patch of potential wildlife habitat. Together these form a sizeable, complex mixture supporting a wealth of wildlife.

Buildings and structures are distinct features of these areas and can be important for some groups of wildlife. Examples include roosts of starlings on electricity pylons at Bridgemoor or pied wagtails in the town centre car parks. Little direct management action for biodiversity takes place on existing buildings throughout the Borough. Indirectly, however, features such as installation of solar panels, double-glazing, cavity wall and loft insulation, energy-efficient boiler systems and white goods, recycling and compost initiatives can benefit biodiversity globally and within Swindon Borough, by increasing energy efficiency and decreasing the amount of resources used.

Gardens, allotments and incidental green space vary in size, management, features and planting. The design and content reflects the preferences of planners, designers, local people and the present owners. It is within the confines of these sites that many local people find a space to relax and an opportunity to get closer to nature. Most sites

will contain some or all of the following features that benefit wildlife species:

- Showy flowers (native, hybrids or ornamentals) that produce nectar
- Fruit and berry-bearing shrubs
- Artificial and natural shelter, feeding, breeding and hibernation sites
- Diverse vegetable patches
- "Wild areas" or low maintenance sites
- Patches of grassland
- Ponds

Many private gardens have an area set aside for wildlife and these are highly valued. Efforts range from the installation of a bird box to the dedication of the garden as a wildlife sanctuary. Families use these areas as informal education sites and many become involved in national schemes to monitor wildlife (for example, the RSPB's Big Garden Bird Watch). These are mainly small, private sites, tended by individuals and families rather than traditional community groups. However, in total the number of individuals tending these areas and providing or receiving benefits from contact with nature would probably far outnumber all other community groups put together.

Incidental sites within the Borough are usually managed for other reasons and have biodiversity value almost as an afterthought.

**Allotments:** A total of 29 allotment sites are administered by Swindon Borough (Final Draft Open Space Audit and Assessment October 2003). These cover an area of 33.1ha and range in size from 0.08ha to 4.17ha. Occupancy rates vary considerably across sites. Not all are administered by SBC as there are a few parochial and privately rented sites such as those at South Marston.

Within the Swindon Borough Local Plan: Revised Deposit Draft, Policies R5 and R6 refer to Appendix 9. These call for new housing development to make adequate provision for

open space. This includes 0.3ha per 1000 population of allotment provision within 600 metres and meeting a local standard in terms of quality.

### Why is this habitat important?

*"The average back garden may contain twice as many species as have so far been identified on the whole planet" (1)*

(This quotation is taken from research that indicates that western science has so far described about one million species but that many, especially the microscopic, have not yet been recorded.)

Gardens vary in size, but their value to wildlife increases when they are arranged in a block, as is the case with allotments. Gardens with a variety of native and/or nectar-producing plants are most beneficial to wildlife, especially where ponds are included.

Some incidental greenspace is little more than a green desert of regularly mown grass. Other areas contain scattered trees, bushes and regularly spaced ornamental shrub and flowerbeds. These sites are of limited biodiversity value and highly managed but often valued by many and pleasing to the eye. With less intensive management and with a few selective changes their value for wildlife can be increased. These changes can contribute towards the primary function of the site, and mean they require less frequent maintenance and be cheaper to manage.

Cemeteries and churchyards can sometimes escape the intensive management of other open spaces and so still hold vestiges of past habitats. They may also contain old trees and structures that may contain bat roosts. Lichens are often noted growing on gravestones and walls.

**Buildings:** Many of our most characteristic species have close associations with our homes. This is often reflected in their names, for example, house sparrow and house martin. Both of these species are noted as being of conservation concern.

**School Grounds:** Many school grounds contain a piece of land set aside as a wildlife area.

**Allotments:** Usage of allotment sites varies across the Borough. In some areas uptake is high and specialist allotment holder groups have formed whereas at the other extreme some plots are nearly empty. Both tended and derelict sites can be significant for biodiversity. Whilst providing limited opportunities for plant species, they can be important for mammals, amphibians, birds, reptiles and a range of invertebrates.

### How is this habitat protected?

Many policy and legal documents require biodiversity to be incorporated into the planning system and these have relevance to existing urban areas. Recent local examples include the Draft Local Plan and the Draft Wiltshire and Swindon Structure Plan.

The Local Planning Authority (LPA) has a duty to ensure that Favourable Conservation Status is maintained for European Protected Species whenever a planning application is lodged. Biodiversity is a material consideration in any planning application and the planning authority has a duty to have regard to those issues.

New developments within the urban footprint of Swindon are subject to Planning Policy Guidance note 3, which expects residential development to achieve a minimum density of 30 dwelling per hectare (permissions on the Southern Development Area show a density of 43.27 dwellings per hectare). Government guidance also requires the Local Authority to identify previously developed land to meet housing need. These lead to situations in which private garden area is decreased and communal/municipal space increased.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

### Opportunities

Swindon has a long history of active community engagement in conservation from which we can take heart. This includes the long established groups based at Peatmoor and Seven Fields - the

first two winners of the Quality of Life awards for the Borough.

Local communities often understand and value the biodiversity on their doorsteps. Providing opportunities to actively engage in the management of these sites can help secure long-term sustainable management.

The draft Local Plan contains policies ENV17, ENV18, ENV20 and ENV21, covering Local Biodiversity Sites, Habitat and Species Protection, Existing Green Corridors and Potential Green Corridors respectively. These and the other policies contained within strategic plans and policies provide an opportunity to ensure that biodiversity is taken into account.

A key opportunity is the redevelopment and the changes happening in the built-up area - these should offer opportunities for creating a significant green infrastructure extending into the heart of the town.

The presence of a community forest and the resource therefore to integrate green space into the built environment.

### Threats

At the first Swindon Biodiversity Action Plan conference on May 10th 2003, a number of threats to urban wildlife were identified. These included:

- **Over-management:** "Green manicures" leading to significant decrease in the biodiversity value.
- **Litter:** litter is not a significant wildlife conservation issue in itself, but sites can become eyesores and then undergo a "green manicure".
- **Vandalism:** once again, not a significant conservation issue in itself, but activities such as the burning of hedgerows can lead to significant biodiversity loss and the need for a green manicure.
- **Pollution.**
- **Planning (allocations)/Government planning policy:** increasing pressure to build on previously developed sites (brownfield sites).
- **Interdependency (erosion) of habitats/Fragmentation:** the allocation of new sites or

continued development can lead to the break up of valuable wildlife habitats.

- **Lack of vision:** many people would be happy to see biodiversity integrated into plans that provide social, economic and environment gain. They are often failed by a lack of knowledge of biodiversity on the part of the planning system.
- **Lack of local ownership (information at a grass roots level).**

## PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

### What needs to be done?

Existing Urban Areas provide a major challenge and opportunity for biodiversity conservation, as this is where people and wildlife meet. Priorities are to survey the full range of urban habitats, protect important sites from changes in land use or inappropriate management and to incorporate biodiversity into the lives of people at home, work and play.

Therefore, key actions are to:

- Actively engage communities in the management of local sites.
- Assist people to become more effective at helping nature in their gardens.
- Protect known sites.
- Identify and map urban Swindon's wildlife.

## WHERE CAN I FIND EXAMPLES OF THIS HABITAT?

- These are the sites next to which we all go to school, work, rest and play.
- The Haven: Wildlife Garden next to the TWIGS site near to the Manor Garden Centre in Cheney Manor is a great place to go for inspiration. Please phone to ensure that access can be arranged (01793) 877261.
- Inglesham Church constructed in the 11th century. Access from the A361 just before turning onto mile straight at Lechlade.

### AUTHOR

Neil Pullen, Swindon Wildlife Officer. Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, The Swindon Environment Centre, Suite 2 Beaver House, Victoria Road, Swindon. SN1 3UZ  
Tel (01793) 526228 Email neilp@wiltshirewildlife.org





## 6.2 New Development Sites Habitat Action Plan

### VISION

All new build in Swindon will be an example of high quality, environmentally sensitive sustainable development other Boroughs will seek to follow. Development proposals will avoid impacting on existing wildlife rich areas and will seek to create and maintain new areas for wildlife.

### KEY FACTS

#### What have we got?

Swindon is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the South West region and is subject to a high degree of development pressure. The Swindon Area has been identified as a Principal Urban Area in the South West Regional Planning Guidance (RPG10). Outline planning permission was granted in 2004 for up to 4,500 dwellings in the Southern Development Area. An area to the east of Coate Water SSSI has been identified in the Wiltshire and Swindon Structure Plan as a site for development in the period to 2011. The Eastern Development Area (EDA) is being considered as providing the focus for the future expansion of Swindon beyond 2016. New development poses one of the greatest threats impacting on biodiversity and Swindon faces pressure from an increasing number of large-scale developments when compared to many other local authorities. Therefore the significance of Swindon's development sites and the opportunities they provide both for protecting or enhancing existing habitats and providing new habitats need to be recognised.

#### Why is this important?

Once sites are identified within new developments the planning system needs to ensure their protection and the enhancement of

any protected species and designated sites. Wherever possible areas supporting BAP species and habitats should also be protected. Mitigation and enhancement will be secured through the planning process, by way of planning conditions and long term management and funding secured through legal agreements.

Additional opportunities also arise for the enhancement of habitats where mitigation measures for habitats and species are required through the planning system. The provision of mitigation areas provides an opportunity to enhance wildlife value by providing new habitats. This may also enable local communities to become engaged in the process and the sites can become a valuable recreational, educational and environmental resource.

Land available for habitat creation within development sites includes land required by current Swindon planning policies for the provision of open space, archaeological preservation, flood storage areas, protected woodlands and protected habitats. Land available for habitat creation should fit into a properly designed green infrastructure. Wherever land is known to have a high biodiversity quality it should be properly protected. Where there is a need for further urban expansion, research will be required to establish baseline data for all environmental issues relating to land on the urban fringe and beyond. If this work can be undertaken at an early stage by the developers or their ecological consultants before any development, this will enable decisions about new habitat requirements (for example linking existing habitats via new hedgerows, woodland etc.) to be taken. These should then be provided as part of the new development, together with a means of securing long term management by the developer.

### How is this protected?

The policies set within Swindon's Local and Structure Plans and the role played by statutory bodies such as English Nature and the Environment Agency help to ensure that such sites are protected appropriately. Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) have full legal protection and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 now place new duties on the Council to take reasonable steps to further conservation and enhancement of the features for which an SSSI has been notified. Policies in the emerging Local Plan 2011 also afford protection to locally important sites, Local Nature Reserves and County Wildlife Sites (ENV17) as well as protected species and their habitat (ENV18). Through the planning process sites of biodiversity importance need to be identified and properly considered so that they can be suitably protected. In addition, all development plans and programmes will be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) from July 2004. The SEA Directive is intended to help protect the environment and promote sustainable development. Many sites within a plan or programme will also be subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

### Opportunities

- High quality habitat creation e.g. native broadleaved woodland may form part of a larger development.
- Wildspaces with biodiversity value can be planned into design at early stages.
- Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive came into effect from 22nd July 2004 and requires all development plans to be sustainable.
- Habitats occurring within a development area that require active management (e.g. ponds) can be secured through the planning process.
- Chance to involve communities in managing wildlife areas.
- Securing mitigation through planning conditions.
- Ensuring long term management of sites through planning obligations.

- Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDs) to be incorporated within all major developments.
- Incorporating features into the design of buildings themselves - e.g. bat bricks, roost sites etc.

### Threats

- Direct loss of habitat through land taken for development.
- Local extinction of species through habitat loss and disturbance.
- PPG3 requires high housing densities leaving less opportunities for wildlife areas and large gardens.
- Fragmentation of habitat.
- Lack of awareness of biodiversity issues by developers.

Allocation of land for development is determined currently through the local development plan, and is subject to public consultation including an Inquiry in Public. Following the decision to allocate an area of land for development an Environmental Impact Assessment may need to be carried out, and this should identify any features that will need to be protected in situ. It may also be necessary to provide compensatory habitat either elsewhere within the development or off site.

Although nationally and locally important sites are mapped within the Borough, there is a high probability that a proposed site will support a number of habitats or species. Of particular significance to developers are statutory protected species and in Swindon these include great crested newts, otters, bats, native crayfish, water voles, badgers, grass snakes and slow-worms. There are a number of guidance notes on protected species that have been produced by English Nature. This guidance covers what the animals requirements, are, whether a licence is required, when to survey, etc. In addition, English Nature and Swindon Borough Council will be providing detailed guidance through the production of Supplementary Planning Guidance (or Supplementary Planning Document SPD) and Green space design.

Grant aid opportunities through Greenspace initiatives could well be pursued to good effect. There is a dedicated Community Liaison Officer at Swindon Borough Council to work with local communities on existing and new Local Nature Reserves. There are a number of other organisations that are well placed to support biodiversity action by communities living in new developments. These include Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, Great Western Community Forest and BTCV.

The public is sometimes concerned over unkempt areas and many attempts at habitat creation have failed following criticism about the appearance of sites. In contrast, some open spaces within new developments can be over-managed. It is important that responsibility is allocated for the management of wildlife areas in open spaces. During construction the responsibility will be with the developers before areas are passed to Swindon Borough Council. In some cases local community groups should be encouraged to manage local wildlife sites and where appropriate community trusts or similar put in place. The developer should be responsible for providing a management plan and appropriate commuted sums to allow the Borough or community groups to effectively manage areas for wildlife. The use of local seed sources for native wildflowers is to be encouraged, as is the reduction in the use of fertilisers, which encourage alien weeds and suppress diversity. A good example is The Haven, located on the edge of Cheney Manor Industrial Estate at the Akers Way end. It aims to make wildflowers abundant and increase butterfly populations in Swindon.

## PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

### What needs to be done?

Our key priorities within the New Development HAP are to ensure that new developments are sustainable and have minimal adverse impacts on biodiversity and that opportunities are sought to enhance biodiversity.

To enable this to happen we must: -

- Make the link to quality of life – demonstrate that flourishing biodiversity makes a real contribution to the quality of life of residents, workers and visitors.
- Ensure that SBC maintains clear and consistent policies that guide sustainable development.
- Raise awareness of nature conservation issues amongst those involved in the planning process.
- Ensure that construction, planning, development and regeneration have minimal adverse impacts on biodiversity.
- Seek opportunities in construction, planning, development and regeneration to enhance biodiversity.
- Ensure existing and newly created wildlife areas are maintained.

## WHERE CAN I FIND EXAMPLES OF THIS HABITAT?

- Flood storage areas are examples of habitat creation through development. Kembrey Street Flood Storage area is visible from the Great Western Way just before the Sikh Temple site.
- Nationwide Headquarters. This building nestles within a woodland setting created in partnership with Great Western Community Forest.

### AUTHOR

Ed Stanford, Head of Landscape and Countryside, Swindon Borough Council, Premier House, Station Road, Swindon. SN1 1TZ