

# DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL

## URBAN NATURE CONSERVATION STUDY

Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre  
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### SUMMARY

#### Purpose of study

The environment is one of the four main drivers of sustainable development, and in this context biodiversity needs to be fully integrated into planning policy and delivery. As part of the new planning system known as the Local Development Framework, information on urban wildlife is fundamental given the pressure on land resources in and around our towns. The aims of the study are:

*'To provide a well reasoned and coherent strategy for the protection and enhancement of key wildlife areas and network of spaces / natural corridors within the towns and large villages of Dacorum'.*

The Dacorum Urban Nature Conservation Study considers the wildlife resources within the six major settlements in Dacorum, namely Berkhamsted, Bovington, Hemel Hempstead, Kings Langley, Markyate and Tring. They were mapped using existing habitat information, additional sites identified from aerial photo interpretation and local knowledge. The areas adjacent to each settlement – up to a distance of 1km – were also mapped in a similar fashion to place the urban areas within the context of their surrounding environments. This process identified the most important sites already known such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, local sites meeting minimum standards known as 'Wildlife Sites', and other sites or features of more local significance within the urban areas known collectively as 'Wildspace'. These incorporated Hertfordshire Biological Record Centre's 'Ecology Sites' where appropriate, old boundary features such as hedgerows and tree lines, as well as significant garden areas or open spaces which may survive. Other urban areas designated as Open Land with some ecological potential are also shown.

## **Results**

This process identified a complex resource of ecologically valuable sites, stepping stones, corridors and green wedges throughout each settlement. Together they represent a network of valuable wildlife resources which allow ecological processes to be sustained within the urban areas. Areas of deficiency are also identified.

This is set in the context of English Nature's 'Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards', which propose minimum standards for biodiversity resources for biodiversity and communities at a range of scales. In practice these may be aspirational given that the nature of open land and biodiversity resources is a legacy of evolving development rather than an issue which has been fully considered and planned from the outset. However, they remain a standard against which to achieve, and plans, policies and management opportunities should take them into consideration.

## **Recommendations**

A review of the Local Plan policies for biodiversity is provided for the borough and for each settlement. Generally existing policies are considered to provide a comprehensive approach to site protection and management. However, additional views on policy improvements are also given. Some approaches require that biodiversity issues are considered as a fundamental part of a proposal, which is required to meet a sufficient score. Achieving such a 'greenspace factor' is another mechanism recommended to integrate biodiversity into developments.

The identification of biodiversity resources and the policies developed to protect and manage sites is a fundamental approach to the concept of sustainable development, and this requires a positive approach to biodiversity conservation, mitigation and compensation. These are used to guide planning and management opportunities that are described for each settlement in the form of a series of recommendations.

## **Conclusions**

1. The urban biodiversity of the six major settlements in Dacorum needs to be considered with respect to the nature of the ecological resources of the Borough as a whole and their immediate hinterland. The ecological networks and processes that exist at the broad scale are important in helping sustain the habitats and wildlife within the urban areas, and are also important in providing additional resources that can be accessed by local communities.

2. The pattern of biodiversity resources within urban areas should be developed and maintained based upon the maps in Appendices 2 -7. Within the detailed study areas, all known resources are identified. These include those with statutory and non-statutory designations as well as sites or features of more local importance, including Open Land designated within the Local Plan.

3. Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves and Wildlife Sites should be protected from adverse development appropriate to their status. The maintenance and enhancement of these assets will be encouraged through management. Ultimately these are the most intrinsically valuable wildlife resources and represent critical capital within the urban context.
4. Locally valuable 'Wildspace' areas should be protected, particularly where consistent with Open Land designated within the Local Plan. Management should seek to enhance their ecological interest. These sites provide the wildlife corridors, networks and stepping stones that help sustain ecological processes within the settlement. Although they can vary in size and ecological function, where appropriate the protection of corridor features should include the standard guidance provided by British Standard 5837:2005 in relation to trees and advice from the Environment Agency concerning wetlands. The remaining areas of designated Open Land may also be important or potentially so ecologically.
5. Links to open countryside and other recognised sites of wildlife value should be protected and enhanced with appropriate management where possible. These help to sustain the ecological processes to and from the settlement itself, as wildlife does not stop at the edge of a settlement boundary.
6. New sites should be enhanced or created for their wildlife value where appropriate, especially where consistent with Open Land. These can help to offset areas of deficiency or improve public accessibility.
7. All opportunities for Local Nature Reserve designation should be explored and suitable sites designated to help towards meeting English Nature's target for their provision.
8. Finer grained wildlife support should be developed and maintained using the 'Greenspace Factor' principle and policies to protect and / or plant trees, hedgerows and other vegetation, which will contribute to the delivery of sustainable development.
9. The principles of sustainable development should be followed across the borough with respect to biodiversity resources, including opportunities to address deficiencies through planning gain.