



**Parks and Open Spaces  
Biodiversity Policy  
2021-2025**

## Introduction

Sevenoaks has an abundance of public gardens, parks, woodlands and open spaces across the town. These areas provide opportunities for exercise, recreation and relaxation as well as connecting people with nature and each other. Having access to green spaces enhances physical health, mental well-being and life satisfaction.

Open spaces in urban areas are also essential for biodiversity, providing food and habitat for wildlife, as well as helping to mitigate against climate change and pollution. They also act as green corridors linking areas of wildlife value.

The Environment Bill 2020 sets out how the Government will put the environment at the centre of policy making. It will make sure that we have a cleaner, greener and more resilient country for the next generation.

Sevenoaks Town Council's Open Spaces team manage over 38 hectares of land throughout Sevenoaks including formal gardens, playgrounds, open spaces, allotments, a large cemetery and numerous woodlands. These areas range widely from heavily used gardens and sports grounds, to more wildlife rich and less intensively managed open spaces. This policy considers how to maintain and enhance biodiversity across Sevenoaks Town Council's open spaces in order to maximise gains for wildlife in the town.

## General principles

### 1. Maintain and enhance existing wildlife-rich habitats

It is important to protect and enhance areas within STC that are already benefiting wildlife. These include Greatness Cemetery and Sevenoaks Common which are relatively wildlife-rich sites.



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There are lengths of native hedgerows at a number of sites. These are high value for biodiversity and will be sensitively managed with wildlife in mind. There will be no significant hedge works on native 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.

A new hedgerow was planted at Brittain's Common in 2020 to help mitigate the noise and pollution from the A224 and provide additional habitat.

Sevenoaks Town Council secured a grant of 420 wild harvest saplings including Elderberry, Rowan, Hazel, Blackthorn, Dog rose, Crab apple from the Woodland Trust.



There are also areas of scrub surrounding some of the recreation grounds which are valuable for birds and small mammals. Where these are not encroaching onto species rich grassland or impacting recreational use, these can be maintained and allowed to develop.

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

## **2. Create new habitats**

Increasing the amount and types of available habitat benefits wildlife. STC will seek opportunities to create new habitats such as wildflower meadows, tree copses, 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. STC has invested in a controlled droplet application and weed brush 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. STC 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 only limited occurrences of non-native plant species on STC land. STC 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. STC will consult the public when undertaking biodiversity enhancement projects and will offer opportunities for public involvement where appropriate and resources allow.

STC will endeavour to encourage more people into green spaces through communications (press and social media) and by creating Friends Groups and the liaising with local community to organise events and activities in the gardens. There are currently a range of activities available for the public on Sevenoaks Common being run by the volunteers of the Greensands Project. Keeping the formal gardens tidy, colourful and welcoming and The Vine maintained to Green Flag standards also increase the number of visitors and their enjoyment of the sites.

## 7. Connect habitats

Over the past two years small bee and insect friendly habitats have been created and nurtured to act as wildlife corridors between more wildlife rich habitats. These allow pollinators to travel from one patch of land to another which is very important for healthy biodiversity and mitigating for climate change. In 2020 STC was awarded a 'Bees Needs' Award by DEFRA.

## Habitat Specific Principles

### 1. GRASSLAND

A lot of the land managed by STC is grassland. This includes amenity grassland, play areas and wildflower areas.

#### 1.1 Amenity grassland

STC maintain a significant number of amenity grassland sites, sports pitches and lawns. These are regularly cut and of 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 rugby, football pitches and cricket pitches or regularly used lawns (ie. in the gardens), there are limited options to enhance biodiversity.

However, STC 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.
- Allowing scrub areas to develop in areas of amenity grassland, providing food and habitat for invertebrates, birds and mammals.
- Planting trees or native hedges on areas of amenity grassland.

#### 1.2 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.

STC will increase plant species diversity by planting native spring-flowering wildflower bulbs and increase the area of naturalised bulbs by expanding into ornamental lawns or amenity grasslands.

Some areas where bulbs have been planted will be left to grow throughout the year, mowing in late winter, to provide seed heads and hollow stems for birds and invertebrates.

## **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. STC 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. STC 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 STC management. The fishpond at Vine Gardens is of fairly low biodiversity value, with hard edges and surrounded by paving, although it does provide a supply of freshwater to birds and insects. There are some ponds on the allotments and even these small, temporary water bodies provide water for wildlife to drink and will support some invertebrates.

## **5. HEDGES**

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. STC will:

- Reduce frequency of cutting in native hedgerows where it does not impact the visual amenity or safety of the site. STC 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.
- 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. STC has many small wooded areas including Sevenoaks Common with varied age and structure of trees with a native understory.

STC will consider the following options for trees:

- Consider planting trees where appropriate on low value amenity grassland where this does not impact recreation or amenity.
- 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 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.
- 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. STC 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.

## **8. DEADWOOD AREAS AND COMPOST HEAPS**

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. Similarly compost heaps provide additional resources of dead plant matter for fungi and invertebrates to feed on and inhabit; the compost can be used in horticultural operations once it has broken down. The heavy recreational use of STC Parks and Gardens and aesthetic sensibilities of the public (as well as health and safety) will limit our opportunities to create deadwood habitats and compost heaps on our parks and gardens, 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.
- Create compost heaps, fed with grass cuttings, strimmings from herbaceous perennials, old bedding plants, and chipped wood.

## **9. ALLOTMENTS**

STC has two allotment sites providing 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 STC allotments provide opportunities to create new habitats to benefit wildlife.

- Planting native or fruit trees on common areas.

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- Creating additional hedgerows along boundaries. Natives like hawthorn, blackthorn, holly and brambles can be mixed with non-native pyracantha or Japanese rose to create a hedge rich in flowers and berries for wildlife. These species are all thorny so double-up as a security measure. Allow scrub areas to develop in uncultivated corners and edges of the allotment.
- 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 STC Parks and Open Spaces Team 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 STCs 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. STC will strive to continue to enhance its parks and open spaces to benefit both people and wildlife into the future.

## Biodiversity Actions

Note, this is currently a working list which will be revised annually with the Biodiversity Policy. Funding, capacity and logistics as well as public and council support will determine which actions can be undertaken.

<b>ACTION</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Identify high value grassland areas and revise mowing regime accordingly. This will need to be accompanied by a publicity campaign and signage.		Spring 2022 and ongoing
Create long grass margins (2-5 m) next to boundaries and around the base of trees (at least 50 cm) in less heavily used amenity grassland where trees are not donated.		Spring 2022 and ongoing
Seek opportunities for native hedge planting on perimeters.		Autumn 2021, Autumn 2022
Assess hedges across estate and identify appropriate management and restoration.		Autumn/Winter 2021
Encourage residents to participate in the 'Adopt a Tree' scheme to purchase a tree as a unique gift to celebrate a birthday, anniversary, or remember a loved one.		ongoing
Promote tree planting days		Autumn 2021 and ongoing
Create Friends Groups to protect and enhance habitats		Winter 2021, Spring 2022
support residents and local organisations activities to enhance and promote biodiversity		Ongoing
Raise awareness of environment and promote conservation projects in conjunction local partner organisations		Ongoing
Plant native trees, with emphasis on fruit and nut trees, to supplement current tree stock.		Winter 2021 Winter 2021 Ongoing
Investigate opportunities for enhancing grassland biodiversity by creating wildflower areas using seeds, plugs or by planting naturalised bulbs.		Autumn 2021 Spring 2021 Autumn 2021
Continue to reduce herbicide use and seek alternative technologies as they emerge.		Ongoing
Install bird, bat, owl and insect boxes		ongoing
Assess allotments for potential wildlife enhancements in common areas – specifically ponds and plantings.	allotments	2022
Engage allotment holders in wildlife friendly gardening and consider if our approach to inspections is enhancing biodiversity.	allotments	2022/23