



Bedfordshire and Luton Habitat Action Plan: Wood-pasture and Parkland

Updated September 2015



Foreword

We are fortunate in Bedfordshire to have a fantastic range of habitats and species within a relatively small geographical area. It is a county of marked contrasts, with the chalk habitats of the North Chilterns, the heathland and acid grassland of the Greensand Ridge and the woodlands and rolling countryside of the Ouse Valley. The fact that species such as adders, dormice and otters are all now expanding their ranges to varying degrees is something we should be proud of and testament to the work of the organisations and individuals involved, but we should not be complacent. There is much to be done, and these Biodiversity Action Plans set out the scale of that challenge very clearly. Only by continuing to work in partnership, putting the case for nature ever more strongly and clearly, can we hope to build on recent progress, bring the natural environment to the fore of the thinking of key decision-makers and reverse long-term declines.

Jon Balaam, Chair of Bedfordshire Local Nature Partnership



Biodiversity Action Plans Overview

The **UK Biodiversity Action Plan** (BAP) was created in response to a commitment at the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. It summarises the status of the most threatened habitats and species in the UK and then sets out a series of actions to halt their decline and then reverse it. There are National Action Plans for 1150 species and 65 habitats. The last meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity took place in Nagoya, Japan during October 2010. During the convention the BAP was replaced by the **Aichi Targets**, which were signed by 192 governments. These 20 Targets aim to halt the loss in biodiversity worldwide by 2020. Within the targets there are a range of challenges, from protecting our best habitats and rarest species, to restoring the services our natural environment provides and tackling climate change. The *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework* (July 2012) describes how the Aichi Targets will be implemented across the UK and is underpinned by a Biodiversity Strategy for each Country. In England this is *Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services* (August 2011).

Although the Aichi Targets are the focus from the most recent Convention on Biological Diversity, the BAP is still a very valuable reference nationally and locally. It has been used to draw up statutory lists in some of the more recent Acts of Parliament which aim to protect and enhance biodiversity. In 2006 the **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act** (NERC) came into effect. In Section 41 of the Act there is a list of habitats and species which are “*of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity*”. This lists all the BAP habitats and species which are still regarded as priorities for conservation under the *UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework*. The list includes 56 habitats and 943 species. It was included to assist public bodies with the statutory duty placed on them by Section 40 of the Act. This is often referred to as the ‘Biodiversity Duty’ and states that public bodies have to:

“In exercising their functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.”

The aim of the Act is to embed nature conservation within all the relevant policies and decisions that public bodies make. Public bodies include a range of organisations from the Borough and Ward Councils to bodies carrying out functions of a public character under a statutory power. There is a Guidance Document that accompanies this Act to assist local authorities to implement the Biodiversity Duty.

Priority species and habitats are also recognised in the **National Planning Policy Framework** (NPPF), which came into effect in early 2012. The NPPF replaced most of the planning guidance which was previously available. It promotes the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats and ecological networks as well as the protection and recovery of priority species (paragraph 117).

Although the BAP is no longer promoted nationally it is written into legislation and policies which are being currently used. To support this locally, the BAP is still in use to inform and guide many projects and is kept relevant.



Wood-pasture and Parkland

National lead organisation(s):
Natural England

County lead organisation(s):
Bedfordshire Woodland Forum

Working lowland wood-pastures and parklands are those where grazing is still practised at a level that sustains the special features associated with open ground. They are products of historical land management systems and are characterised by vegetation structure rather than a particular plant community.

Current status

National status

This habitat type typically consists of large spreading trees, often pollarded, at various densities in a matrix of grassland, heathland and woodland. It is estimated that less than 10,000 to 20,000 ha of working wood-pasture and parkland remains. A larger area of relict wood-pasture and parkland exists either unmanaged or as scattered trees in arable or improved pasture. This habitat is believed to have been widespread in lowland landscapes through the medieval age and up to the early 19th century. Enclosure, conversion to forestry or intensive agriculture has led to a decline in quantity and quality of sites. The greatest extent of this habitat in Western Europe probably survives in southern England.

Wood-pastures and parklands contain large numbers of veteran trees. They can be internationally important for invertebrates of dead wood habitat such as the violet click beetle and for a range of fungi and lichens dependent on ancient trees.

Local status

At least 95 historic parkland sites can be identified in Bedfordshire but only remnants of most of these remain. A study in 1997 by Leach suggested that the current resource is comprised of 73 sites. The study included several parks that are probably not in fact good enough to be considered part of the resource, and neglected to include several that should be. Perhaps fewer than ten sites contain ancient trees. A further study was completed in 2011 which sought to refine earlier work and contextualise it for the BAP. This found that there are now only 46 extant parkland sites in the county. The two largest parks at Woburn and Woodbury at one time occupied perhaps 3,200 ha. Luton Hoo, Wrest Park, Southill Park and Chicksands Priory probably all exceeded 200 ha. Woburn Park is the largest example of working wood-pasture with large herbivores grazing acid/neutral grassland beneath trees of mixed ages including many veterans. Woburn Park is categorised as High Value under the JNCC guidelines by having more than 100 veterans, more than 15 ancients and more than 15 trees greater than 4.71m girth (1.5m diameter). This makes it nationally important and according to the Woodland Trust of international importance. Cattle grazed in Ampthill Park annually but were withdrawn from the site in the mid-1990s. A recent HLS agreement has restored grazing to part of Ampthill Park and parts of Moggerhanger Park are also grazed



with sheep. Manx sheep also graze part of the parkland at The Lodge at Sandy and under grazing has also been introduced to Flitwick Manor, with the hope that it will be extended in the future. The Lodge, Sandy and Southill include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and parts of others are County Wildlife Sites but this status is related to areas of habitat such as heath, wet woodland or ancient woodland rather than parkland as a habitat in its own right.

Current factors affecting wood-pasture and parkland

- Conversion to other land uses through clearance for localised developments including roads, housing and golf courses.
- Withdrawal of grazing, leading to rapid scrub encroachment, or intensive agricultural management.
- Soil compaction and erosion from car parks and/or overgrazing.
- Surgery to ancient trees in the interests of public safety resulting in the loss of dead and fallen timber, lack of expertise in tree management, removal of dead wood from parks.
- Lack of young trees, which are needed to replace decaying trees.
- Lack of specific protective designation for veteran trees.
- Large-scale harvesting and other insensitive changes in management regimes, such as removal of large old trees.
- Acid deposition, which can threaten individual trees and their associated fungi, lichens and bryophytes.

Current action

Management, research and guidance

Many of the major trees in the remaining remnants of wood-pasture and parkland are covered by Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) administered by local authorities. TPO can afford protection from damage but if not flexibly applied can also inhibit proper management of woods. The Woodland Trust also run the Ancient Tree Inventory – a database of ancient and special trees. Data from this is available on their website and through the Bedfordshire and Luton Biological Recording Centre and can be used to inform planning decisions.

Advice on the management of the other aspects of wood-pasture and parkland, for example the grasslands, is available for a range of organisation with the county including The Greensand Trust and Wildlife Trust. Although the sites which are designated as CWS do not receive any legal protection they do receive an element of defence within the planning system which discourages development, although this does not prevent sites degrading in other ways.



Achievements since publication of first Action Plan

Since the production of the first BAP for wood-pasture and parkland in 2008 there has been significant progress in identifying the current resource in Bedfordshire and some improvements to the management of some of these sites. The 2011 “*Survey of Parkland Sites in Bedfordshire and Luton*” built on the work available to the first Plan. It identified sites which met the UK BAP habitat criteria, delineate the boundaries and assess each site’s condition and management. The survey found 46 extant parkland sites ranging in size from Woburn Park to ‘pocket parks’ of less than a hectare at Eggington House and Bassmead Manor. Over half of these are in need of restoration as their sward has been improved or they have been converted for agriculture.

During the production of the previous BAP the lack of grazing was identified as a particular threat to the existing parklands. Since then a recent HLS agreement has reintroduced grazing to part of Ampthill Park, with the hope that the area will be increased in the future, and grazing has also been introduced to parts of Moggerhanger Park. At Flitwick Manor Park, Flitwick Town Council have entered into an HLS agreement and begun to graze the section of the site to the south-east of Flit Water. In the future it is hoped that cattle will graze the whole site and the Flit Water will be restored to a more open lake. Rushmere Park is also part of an HLS scheme, although it is for its heathland and acid grassland habitats which make up elements of the parkland. Although this site is not currently grazed there are plans to create a parkland landscape to the west of the new visitor centre. There are also plans to improve the parkland at Houghton Hall Park in Houghton Regis. Central Bedfordshire Council have applied for HLS funding to re-establish the character and appearance of the historic park whilst making it more attractive, accessible and useable for local communities. Although progress has been significant at these sites, there is still much to do to protect and restore many others.

In total, 156 ha of wood pasture and parkland have been successfully maintained and another 2 ha were restored.

Action plan objectives and targets

Objective

Maintain and where possible restore Bedfordshire’s wood-pasture and parkland sites.

Targets

- A. Maintain the current baseline of parkland sites in Bedfordshire and Luton (Figure 1).
- B. Restore by 2020 two sites of relict or poorly managed wood-pasture or parkland to a favourable ecological condition.
- C. Achieve favourable condition of all wood-pasture and parkland sites by 2030.
- D. By 2020 begin creation of 40 ha of new wood-pasture and/or parkland.

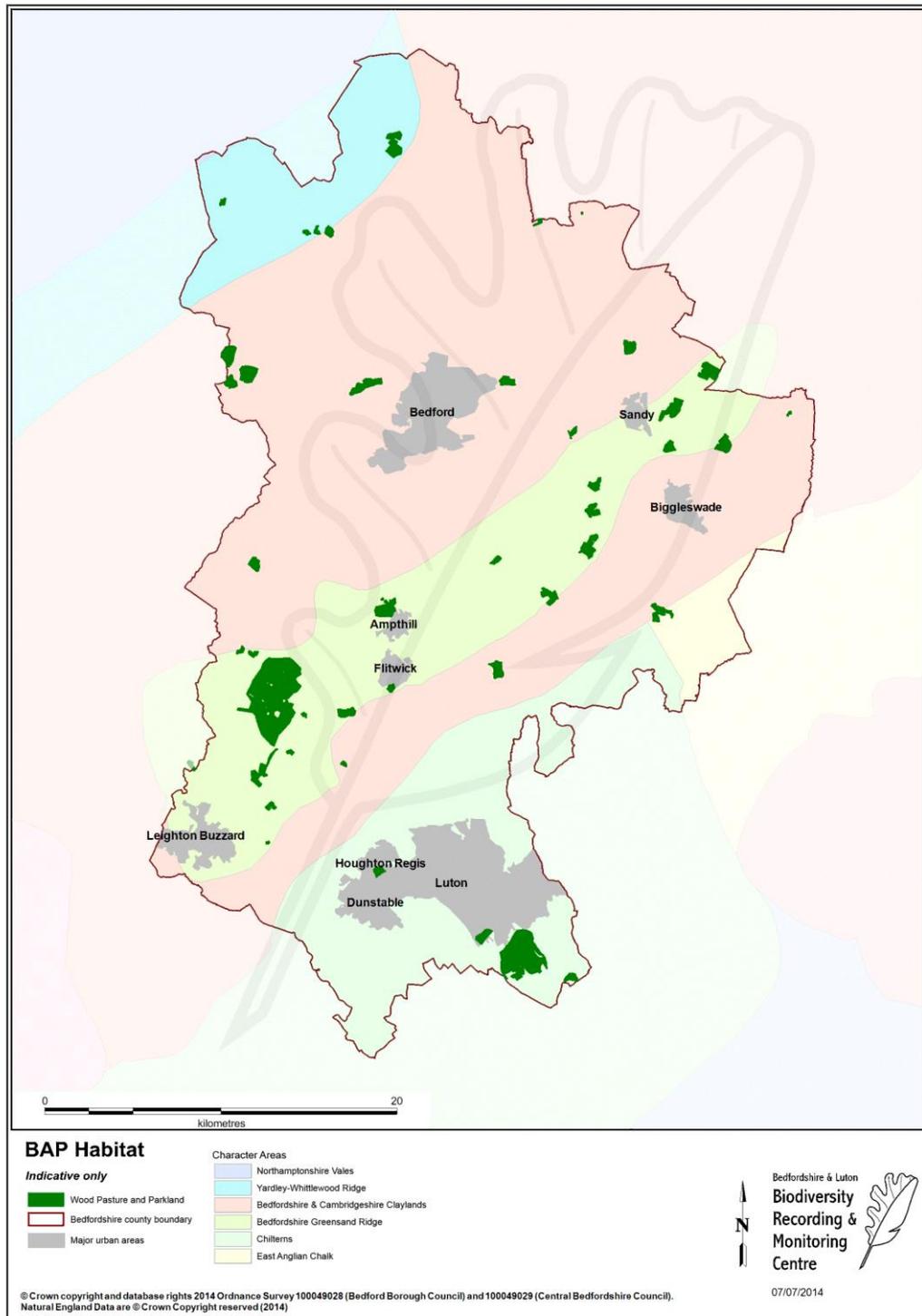


Figure 1: Distribution of wood-pasture and parkland sites across Bedfordshire

Proposed action

Partners

Bedford Borough Council
Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity
Central Bedfordshire Council
Forest of Marston Vale
Forestry Commission

Luton Borough Council
Natural England
The Greensand Trust
BCN Wildlife Trust
Woodland Trust

Action

Policy and legislation

No local action identified

Site safeguard and management

1. By 2020 the Woodland Trust create 40 ha of wood-pasture at Holcot Wood and begin restoration of wood-pasture in Reynolds Wood (20 ha).
2. Bedford Borough Council to continue restoration of Clapham Park Wood (15 ha) through continued grazing and progressive thinning of the tree blocks.
3. Work with site owners to restore grazing at Woodbury and Hazells Hall.
4. By 2020 enter two parks into HLS with both historic and biodiversity benefits.
5. Luton Borough Council to bring Stockwood Park into favourable condition by 2020.
6. The Greensand Trust and Central Bedfordshire Council to create a parkland landscape at Rushmere Country Park to the west of the visitor centre.
7. Seek to increase the protection of the parkland habitats at Rushmere Park alongside those in King's Wood.

Advisory

8. Provide advice and support as needed to ensure continued positive management at Wrest Park, Flitwick Manor, Ampthill Park, Houghton Hall Park and other important parkland sites in the county.
9. Conduct every 3 years a tree safety course for landowners, to increase their awareness of veteran tree safety and direct them to

sources of advice.

Future research and monitoring

10. By 2020 develop a standard monitoring method and record sheet for wood-pasture and parkland.

11. By 2020 conduct a full ecological baseline survey of all key parkland sites for which access permission can be obtained.

12. Monitor County Wildlife Site parklands every 5 years for loss and significant damage.

13. Initiate a programme of invertebrate sampling at key parkland sites in Bedfordshire and Luton.

Communication and publicity

14. Conduct a publicity campaign on the importance of veteran trees and parkland.



Monitoring the Action Plan

This action plan will be reviewed every five years.

Complementary plans

A national action plan exists for lowland wood-pasture and parkland.

Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire have also written action plans for wood-pasture and parkland. This action plan links to other Bedfordshire and Luton action plans, in particular those for woodland, lowland meadow and traditional orchards.

Acknowledgements

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