

URBAN HABITAT STATEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban habitat is not a priority in the UK BAP, but an Urban Habitat Statement is included and was later renamed as *Built Up Areas and Gardens* to include a wider range of habitats⁴⁹. Urban areas provide a myriad of ecological niches that when taken together represent a very rich biodiversity resource. Some of the habitats found in urban areas may be unique and important from a scientific point of view. Others, though biologically interesting, are of greater value by virtue of them being accessible and interactive with a large number of people. Many urban action plans have been written for LBAPs across the UK because of their importance for wildlife and to local residents, and as a way of encouraging people to appreciate biodiversity close at hand.

The habitat types covered by this habitat statement are:

- **Domestic Gardens**
- **Old Buildings**
- **Unused Urban/Industrial Land**
- **Allotments**
- **Churchyards**
- **Public Parks**

2. HABITAT DEFINITION

In the UK BAP⁴ this habitat type is defined as urban and rural settlements, farm buildings, caravan parks and other man made structures, such as industrial estates, retail parks, waste and derelict ground, urban parkland, transport infrastructure, domestic gardens, allotments and churchyards.

2.1 Domestic Gardens

As a nation we look after more than one million hectares of garden. With the countryside increasingly under threat, every garden, however big or small, is a potential nature reserve⁴¹. Although individual gardens may be small, together they form a patchwork, linking urban green spaces with the open countryside. Gardens are relatively quiet, generally sheltered, and often follow the line of old landscape features, for example hedges which frequently date back hundreds of years, providing animals with places to feed, breed, nest and shelter.

2.2 Old Buildings

All buildings both new and old can provide habitats for a variety of species. However, old buildings, particularly those constructed with local materials, such as stone and old timbers, can be particularly important for providing nest and roosting sites for bats and birds such as barn owls, sparrows, swallows, house martins and swifts, while mosses, lichens and a number of insects can also find a niche.

2.3 Unused Urban/Industrial Land

Unused urban land is defined as land previously developed and subsequently abandoned ("brownfield"), or land within an existing urban industrial development yet to be developed. Unused urban/industrial land can often lie unused for many years. Naturally seeded urban areas or urban industrial sites, such as demolition sites or unexploited industrial land, can be particularly species-rich, often reflecting the complex mixture of features. In the early stages

of colonisation short-lived (ephemeral) species are favoured and may include many uncommon species of bees and wasps, for which urban areas are now strongholds. In the later stages of succession short perennial, tall ruderal plants arrive, and succession will continue through to the formation of woodland. This habitat also contains some uncommon invertebrate species such as bees and wasps, beetles and flies, and the lichens of disused land often include several rare species.

*There is some overlap with this urban habitat category and post-industrial land habitats. This statement deals with urban industrial areas within the settlement boundary, but there may be some land reclamation schemes listed in the *Post-Industrial Habitat Statement* that relate to urban areas.

2.4 Allotments

Allotments derive from the enclosure legislation of the 18th and 19th centuries and the word *allotment* originates from land being allotted to an individual under an enclosure award. They started off as a requirement under the General Enclosure Act 1845, which required provision for the landless poor, and then, through the 19th century, parcels of land in urban areas began to be used as allotments. The spread of urban allotments was intensified by the growth of high-density housing, often without gardens. They played an important role for food production in both World Wars, with 1.4 million plots producing around 1.3 million tonnes²². Modern legislation covering allotment provision and protection has developed with various Allotment Acts being introduced between 1908 and 1950. These are still in force and continue to define many aspects of allotment provision, for example, a duty is placed upon local authorities to provide allotments where demand exists, and protection is given to statutory sites owned by local authorities.

Allotments contribute to the amount of green space in many urban settings. They also provide a habitat for a variety of species. Butterflies, moths and bees will be attracted to the flowers of cultivated plants and wildflowers, and the cultivated ground provides feeding opportunities for birds. Disused allotments are a particular haven for wildlife while some tilled plots can act as seed-banks for rare vegetable species¹⁷.

2.5 Churchyards

For the purposes of this plan churchyards relate to land that is used for burials that either surround churches, chapels or other religious buildings in the county borough, or stand in their own grounds such as cemeteries. Churchyards can be found in both a rural and an urban setting. In rural areas, unlike the surrounding farmland, these sites have, generally, not been sprayed with chemical fertilisers and pesticides and can support species-rich grassland. In urban areas, the general lack of agricultural practices and the quiet nature of these sites provide a haven for wildlife in an otherwise hostile urban environment.

The gravestones themselves are often covered by a variety of lichens and mosses, while ancient trees and hedgerows provide important nesting and foraging sites for birds and small mammals. The open grassy areas also benefit a wide range of wildlife. Butterflies, bees and other insects will be attracted to wildflower nectar sources, and bats may roost in church buildings.

2.6 Public Parks

Managed green spaces, including town parks, amenity grasslands and planted shrubberies can, depending on their structure, management and planted species, support a large number of wild species of invertebrates and birds, especially in the suburbs. Public parks provide a wide variety of wildlife habitats, they benefit from being well-established, stable environments, often dating

back to Victorian times. Many parks have a number of different habitats from wetland areas to deciduous woodlands, with hedgerows and open grasslands. They can hold populations of priority species such as the linnet, song thrush, pipistrelle bat and great-crested newt, and a variety of other common species such as hedgehogs. They also act as a transitional zone between other habitat areas. In some instances they provide opportunities for habitat creation and sympathetic management for wildlife. Sometimes they are the only place where people come into contact with wildlife, particularly in heavily built up towns like Caerphilly.

3. CURRENT STATUS

Wildlife is often inconspicuous in urban areas, but it can be fostered and encouraged to enrich and benefit us all in our daily lives. The main, important characteristic of urban areas are the network of green spaces they hold, providing a mosaic of different habitats. This provides the necessary mixture of breeding sites, foraging areas and shelter, needed by many species exploiting these relatively small areas, including BAP priority species, such as the great-crested newt. This network needs sites in close proximity to each other if they are to collectively support viable populations of plants and animals. Outside the built-up area there is a further mosaic of habitats, including roadside verges, railway embankments and colliery spoil tips linking with the open countryside. Given the rather loose definition and the large variety of habitats, it is difficult to estimate the amount of urban habitat in Caerphilly county borough.

The policies in CCBC's UDP³ to develop land within existing settlement boundaries and on brownfield sites, will have an inevitable effect on these sites, and it will be important to ensure that sites are properly assessed for their wildlife value, prior to the procedure of any development. Similarly, new developments will also need to incorporate open spaces with links to adjoining green areas, which may be utilised by urban wildlife species.

3.1 Domestic Gardens

There are many aspects of the domestic garden which are important for biodiversity. Hedgerows, trees, garden shrubs and herbaceous plants provide nectar for bees and butterflies, and berries for birds and small mammals. Wildflowers such as hedgerow, woodland and meadow species, for example, red campion, yellow archangel, bluebell, yellow rattle, ox-eye daisy and greater knapweed are also common to gardens. Garden ponds provide vital breeding grounds for frogs, toads, newts and also many insects, particularly dragonflies and damselflies. Dead vegetation is a vital part of the wildlife garden, for example a pile of logs attracts many invertebrates such as spiders, wood wasps and beetles, and varieties of fungi. Even garden rockeries, dry stone walls, paving, gravel, sink gardens and hanging baskets can support many different species. Butterflies and moths often lay their eggs on specific plants, e.g. nettles (red admiral, small tortoiseshell, peacock and comma). The provision of artificial nest boxes attracts birds, bumblebees, bats and hedgehogs to a garden where other breeding sites may be uncommon.

Nationally, there are around 15 million domestic gardens⁴¹. Caerphilly county borough has approximately 61,000 private gardens, potentially a huge resource for urban wildlife to exploit. The linear nature of many settlements in the county borough means that many gardens are close, or adjacent to, the open countryside and are therefore quite rich in wildlife, attracting many otherwise rarely seen animals, such as slow worms and grass snakes, newts and other amphibians, and many farmland species, including birds such as the song thrush that have lost their traditional habitats through agricultural intensification. They also provide, or have the potential to provide, important wildlife corridors, forming strips of habitat between other

wildlife habitats allowing the free movement of species over a wider area. However, the management of many gardens is currently not very sympathetic to wildlife, few contain 'wild' areas and most consist of single-species, close-mown lawns and a lack of wildlife features such as hedgerows, ponds, trees and deadwood. However, with the rise in popularity of gardening programmes on television, the interest in wildlife gardening is growing, and a range of literature and advice is now available to those interested in making their garden more attractive to butterflies, birds, mammals, frogs and newts.

3.2 Old Buildings

There is currently a lack of knowledge about the use of many of the old buildings in the county borough by particular species, and many have been demolished or renovated without first undertaking a wildlife survey. Anecdotal evidence and casual records indicate that old buildings in the county borough are important as roosting and nesting sites for all bat species (except tree roosting bats such as the noctule), and a number of bird species including barn owl, swallow, swift, house martin, house sparrow and starling. Before granting planning permission there is a need to undertake surveys of various types of buildings, which may have significant wildlife value.

3.3 Unused Urban/Industrial Land

The current distribution of unused urban/industrial land in Caerphilly county borough is not adequately known, but concentrations can be found in the Mid Valley, Upper Rhymney Valley and Aber Valley. The status of this habitat will inevitably change as the demand for development in urban areas increases. Further survey work is required to locate these areas and identify those sites important for wildlife. Several SINC⁴s include this habitat type⁴, and future development will need to take account of the nature conservation interests of these sites.

The **Remploy Factory Grounds SINC**, near Oakdale is a good example of an industrial site where semi-improved neutral grassland has colonised rubbish and spoil around the factory. There is a diverse flora supporting the yellow rattle, pearly everlasting and a range of other characteristic neutral grassland species.

Pen-y-Fan Industrial Estate, north of Croespenmaen contains another SINC, **Valentec Nature Reserve**, which has been designated for its wildflower meadow, neutral grassland, and large area of marshy grassland dominated by rushes, with star moss and sedges in the more waterlogged areas. There is also a pond that is of particular value for dragonflies and other invertebrates.

Penyfan Pond and Meadows SINC includes some areas of species rich grassland within the industrial area, while **Crown Estate Meadows SINC** also contains species rich meadows on land that has been allocated for development.

3.4 Allotments

The importance of allotments for nature conservation has been identified in the document *The Allotment, its Landscape and Culture*¹⁷, with both cultivated and untended allotment plots contributing to maintaining biodiversity. Evidence from the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners shows that allotments have on average up to 30% higher species diversity than urban parks and are ecologically valuable²².

There are 80 allotment sites in Caerphilly county borough: 28 in the former Islwyn borough, for example, **Tunnel Row**, Newbridge and **Halls Gardens**, Crumlin; and 52 in the former Rhymney Valley district, e.g. **Boot Road**, Maesycwmmwr, and **Penydre**, Rhymney. The Islwyn Allotment

Federation actively runs and maintains allotments in this area of the borough, but in the Rhymney Valley CCBC provides grants to each of the on-site allotment committees for necessary maintenance work and equipment.

Rules for the maintenance of allotments in the tenancy agreement include the protection of internal hedges, ditches, trees, buildings and sheds. Wildlife using these habitats are therefore afforded some protection, however, apart from a small number, many tenants are unaware of the importance of allotments for wildlife and the role they play as wildlife corridors.

3.5 Churchyards

There are churchyards and cemeteries in virtually every community in the county borough. The older churchyards in particular can be particularly valuable for wildlife especially where sites are less intensively managed.

Bedwellty Churchyard has been designated as a SINC (36) for its species-rich grassland communities⁴. Further survey work is needed to determine the importance of other churchyards in the county borough.

3.6 Public Parks

There are 11 established public parks in Caerphilly county borough, many dating back to the turn of the 20th century. These are:

Abertridwr Park	Bargoed Park
Crumlin Park	Islwyn Park
Morgan Jones Park	Newbridge Park
Penyrheol Park	Rhymney Park
Risca Park	Senghenydd Park
Waun Fawr Park	

Numerous habitats occur within them, including deciduous woodlands, wetlands, hedgerows and open managed grasslands, but no comprehensive survey has been undertaken to identify their extent and condition. The woodlands at Ystrad Mynach Park have been designated as a SINC (123) and **Sir Harold Finch Memorial Park** has been designated as a LNR (195) and an SSSI for its grassland communities.

For many years public parks have declined both in investment and in use by the public. It is uncertain what effect this has had on biodiversity. Future investment and strategies should dispel the over-tidy image of public parks and encourage management sympathetic to wildlife in order to maintain biodiversity.

3.7 Urban SINCs (Map 10.1)

- 36: **Bedwellty Churchyard**; of botanical importance for its unimproved grassland plants including devil's bit scabious, bitter-vetch, wood bitter-vetch, black knapweed, cats ear, great burnet and birds foot trefoil
- 47: **Park Drive Hollow**; a good example of an urban wildlife site with a variety of habitats including woodland, heath and wetland
- 51: **Pottery Road Woods**; an important urban wildlife habitat
- 61: **Valentec Nature Reserve**; a 2.6ha area of unimproved neutral grassland
- 67: **Remploy Factory Grounds**; a factory compound with a large area of neutral grassland supporting the yellow rattle

- 80: **School Grassland, Pontllanfraith**; a small neutral grassland with common bent and yorkshire fog, abundant devil's bit scabious, tormentil and clover
- 123: **Coedcae Mawr**; an urban oak woodland, important as an urban site for birds and plants
- 180: **Machen Woodlands**; part mature woodland, and a significant urban wildlife habitat for plants and birds

3.8 Associated Species

- **Birds:** *house sparrow* (most urban habitats), *song thrush**, *bullfinch**, *linnet**, *nightjar** (gardens), *spotted flycatcher**, little owl, buzzard, kestrel, barn owl, peregrine falcon, redstart, starling
- **Mammals:** *lesser horseshoe bat**, *pipistrelle bat**, *brown long-eared bat*, *daubentons bat*, *noctule bat*, *whiskered/brandts bat*, badger, hedgehog, grey squirrel, fox
- **Reptiles:** *slow worm*, *common lizard*
- **Amphibians:** *common toad*, *common frog*, *palmate newt*, *smooth newt*, *great-crested newt**
- **Invertebrates:** *buttoned snout moth**, *Other moths*, *Dragonflies and Damselflies*, butterflies and moths, bees and wasps
- **Plants:** *bluebell*, *cowslip*, primrose, snowdrop,

3.9 Links with other Habitats

- *Wetlands* (rivers and streams, ponds, canals)
- *Deciduous Woodlands* (lowland types; lowland beech and yew)
- *Wildlife Corridors* (hedgerows, railways and cycleways, roadside verges)
- *Species-rich Grasslands* (remnant areas)
- *Common Land*
- *Post-Industrial Land* (colliery spoil, refuse tips)

4. CURRENT FACTORS AFFECTING THE HABITATS

- Lack of recognition of the importance of urban habitats for biodiversity – not just their scientific value, but also for their amenity value. A familiar native species in an urban setting will have more significance to many people rather than a rare species in the countryside they are unlikely to see or recognise **(All)**
- Public perception: industrial decline and anti-social activity targeted at brownfield sites has created a negative public image of derelict urban areas, even gardens, public parks and churchyards are not seen as vital biodiversity resources, for example the value of nettles in wildlife gardens **(unused urban/industrial land, public parks, churchyards)**
- Development pressure: the demand for land in urban areas means that urban habitats are under the greatest threat from development **(All)**
- Pollution: urban habitats occasionally contain contaminated land. In some instances this can be advantageous for the wildlife occupying it, as it can deter development. Conversely, it can result in an impoverished flora and fauna **(All)**

- People pressure: 80% of the population live in urban areas. Pressure comes in many guises, from theft and vandalism (**allotments, public parks**) to passive recreation such as playing football or mountain biking, disturbance and trampling. When managing urban habitats these pressures should be considered **(All)**
- Urban design: new developments often fail to take account of wildlife in their initial designs. Opportunities to create interesting habitats may be missed for no other reason than to make the environment look neat **(All)**
- Management of urban habitats: excessive maintenance of mown areas in public parks, and the over-use of pesticides/herbicides and fungicides in gardens and allotments, and tidying of derelict land sites such as scrub clearance and levelling, all make urban habitats less attractive to wildlife **(All)**
- Conversion and rehabilitation: Unsympathetic renovation/Extension of old buildings may threaten associated wildlife **(old buildings)**
- Lack of information of the current urban habitat resource
- Little or no statutory protection
- Habitat fragmentation and isolation from other habitats in built-up areas
- Competition with non-native species, for example the grey squirrel, and from domestic cats

5. CURRENT ACTION

- 5.1 CCBC UDP³ includes a policy for the protection of leisure facilities, including allotments.
- 5.2 Some urban habitats have been designated as SIN, LNR and/or SSSI in the county borough (see section 3.6)⁴.
- 5.3 Grants in the region of £700,000 were given by CCW in 1994/95 for work on urban and urban fringe areas, with roughly 60% going to Groundwork Trusts and Local Authorities.
- 5.4 The Local Agenda 21 Strategy encourages people to take an active role in enhancing their local environment which includes benefits for biodiversity.
- 5.5 In Wales, derelict and disused urban areas may be eligible for grants administered by the WDA. These provide funds for development projects designed to restore derelict land, but some consideration is given to the additional environmental benefits achievable.
- 5.5 RSPB Garden Bird Watch has a significant following throughout the South Wales area, and is valuable for monitoring birds and raising awareness.
- 5.7 There are a variety of publications providing information about urban wildlife habitats, particularly wildlife gardens and ponds. For example, BTCV leaflets: *How to make a Wildlife Garden, Starting a Butterfly Garden, Your Wildlife Pond, Wildflowers in the Garden, Gardens for Birds*; Wildlife Trust materials such as Derbyshire's *Wildlife Gardening - a practical handbook*³¹; and RSPB leaflet *Gardening for Wildlife*.

- 5.8 Information and advice on conservation and planting local native species are available from national organisations such as Flora and Fauna International and Plantlife.
- 5.9 CCBC's Local Agenda 21 school grounds project includes some nature conservation ideas. Urban habitats have considerable potential as an educational/awareness tool for local people and children, also associated with the LBAP process.
- 5.10 Reclamation schemes of unused urban/industrial sites include native species planting.

6. CONSERVATION DIRECTION

6.1 Main objectives for urban habitats are to:

- **Survey** to identify the distribution, extent and condition of urban habitats in the county borough.
- **Maintain and protect** the existing diversity and extent of wildlife in all urban areas.
- **Expand** the range and distribution of associated plants and animals in order to enhance biodiversity in urban areas.
- **Promote** the importance of urban habitats for wildlife and utilise the resource as an educational tool.

6.2 Possible actions to consider include:

- Survey and evaluate the existing range of urban habitats (including those in this statement) in terms of their importance in maintaining wildlife interest.
- Protect important sites from changes in land use and seek to halt any further loss through favourable management and mitigation.
- Encourage the integration of 'green networks' (incorporating a full range of wildlife habitats) in planning and developments within the urban environment.
- Devise and implement strategies to enable the use of vacant and derelict land as wildlife habitats, either temporarily, or wherever possible, permanently.
- Complete the preparation of CCBC Parks Strategy and include proposals to maintain and enhance the biodiversity of public parks.
- Maintain and improve the quality, state and infrastructure of public parks in a way that is sympathetic to biodiversity.
- Develop Best Practice Guidelines for industry, business, landowners and development bodies.
- Produce an Allotment Handbook, which will give advice and best practice information, including composting and biodiversity.
- Encourage community action to survey, plan and manage urban wildlife habitats, e.g. domestic garden and garden pond surveys targeted at biodiversity indicator species, such as garden birds. Provide basic training for interested groups and individuals.
- Promote urban habitats to improve public perception of all urban habitats and use as an educational tool to inform communities and various groups about local wildlife through professional bodies, schools, businesses, community groups, gardeners, allotment societies, and others involved in the urban estate.
- Produce literature about wildlife gardening.
- Identify sources for funding habitat protection and conservation projects, particularly where the local community is involved.
- Develop a Caerphilly county borough environmental excellence award scheme for local environmental groups, etc.