

January 2022

PUTNOE WOOD VISION

Introduction

1. This Vision aims to guide the actions required to help preserve, maintain and enhance the wood. This area provides an exceptional woodland habitat for a large range of wildlife species in addition to providing an important recreational area for community use for families, walkers and dog owners.

2. The Vision sets out the strategic approach to the activities to be undertaken, over a period of 10 years 2022 -2032, by the Friends of Putnoe Wood and Mowsbury Hillfort, in conjunction with Bedford Borough Council (who own the site).

Site location, features and characteristics

3. The 10.34ha site sits on the northern side of Bedford accessed via Wentworth Drive (grid ref TL067526). It is a Local Nature Reserve and County Wildlife Site consisting of ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland, ditches, a brook and remnants of seasonal ponds. The wood has been accessible to the public since the site's purchase in 1969 and it receives high visitor numbers each year. An east-west ride divides the wood into two and footpaths run through the woodland (see appendix 1). Historically woodlands have been managed by coppicing and an active coppice regime is in place in the northern half of the woodland (see appendix 2) The brook running along the north of the site was re-profiled to facilitate drainage from the neighbouring golf course. Where the brook used to meander through the woodland, there are ponds scattered which hold water temporarily after periods of high rainfall. The immediate surroundings of Putnoe Wood are amenity grassland (park, playing fields and golf course). A large residential area is further afield to the south and west with agricultural land to the north. A survey of the woodland was carried out by the Wildlife Trust in 2019. The main trees are oak and ash in addition to several others including hazel, field maple, hawthorn and holly. There is a wide range of woodland wildflowers, birds, bats and other mammals.

4. The boundaries of the wood are defined by the ditches on three sides and the brook on the northside. On the east a bridleway runs between the wood and a rugby club.

5. Overall Objectives

- Maintain the wood as an important habitat
- Undertake an active coppicing regime to encourage wildflowers, growth of existing standards, understorey and enable new tree planting

- Encourage the diversity of wildlife
- Maintain the site as a safe place for visitors
- Carry out regular surveys to assess the condition of the wood
- Promote the amenity value of the site
- Review strategies for future improvements or changes

Analysis of Key Issues.

6. Strengths

- County Wildlife Site and Local Nature Reserve
- Wide range of native species
- Atmospheric character that changes with the seasons
- Attractive and historic site close to a local park
- Accessible to the public with good parking facilities nearby
- Well used by the public
- Active Friends group who are responsible for most maintenance
- Regular monitoring by Friends and Borough Council
- Good interpretation information on site
- A green path has been created to allow visitor access to the interior of the site
- Opportunity for young visitors to make school nature visits and to build dens and camps

7. Weaknesses

- Main paths in poor condition in some places
- Some invasive species such as small balsam and a patch of Spanish bluebells are present
- Acute oak disease (AOD) and ash dieback (ADB) have been found
- Limited information of number and age range of visitors

8. Opportunities

- Introduce main path improvements without changing the character of the site
- Explore potential for accessible route for wheelchair visitors. All weather mobility scooters have been seen using some paths.
- Tree replacement in areas after annual coppicing
- Involving local school pupils
- More surveys of different species
- Survey of how to improve visitor experience
- Secure funding for path improvements and tree planting

9. Threats

- Budget limitations
- Diseases in Ash and Oak trees
- Risk to the public from falling branches
- Many of the mature trees are of a similar age
- Damage to the site from rubbish, digging, lighting fires, biking, blocking brook and ditches

- Pathways becoming worn due to wet weather and increased use
- Green verges of paths being eroded due to visitors avoiding paths in poor condition.

10. Strategic Approach

The Borough Council and Friends Group have agreed that its overall strategic approach should be to maintain the wood's features and habitats. This will continue and the Friends will explore the following:

- Consult visitors about their experience when visiting the wood
- Explore sources of funding for improvements
- Consult Bedfordshire Bat group about care of bats on site
- Consult the Borough Council about the provision of litter bins on the sports pitches adjoining the south boundary of the site.

11. Strategic Management Issues

From on-site experience the Friends have identified the following critical management issues

- Replace the existing outdated Borough management plan
- Establish an ongoing programme of tree replacement
- Essential, durable and appropriate repairs required to some of the gravel paths to maintain the site as a safe and accessible public amenity
- Reinstate the eroded and damaged green margins beside some paths.

12. General Management Issues

Bedford Borough Council will continue to lead in monitoring the health and safety of the mature trees on site. They will take any necessary action including any appropriate work to make them safe.

13. Future Management Issues

- Review and replace the outdated Borough management plan for the site
- Regular maintenance includes coppicing, keeping brook and ditches clear, checking for dangerous trees and branches overhanging paths, litter picking, cutting vegetation back from the path edges, maintaining information boards
- Investigate planting young saplings on freshly cut coppice plots to increase tree population, with a view to replacing old and diseased standards. Other saplings could be planted in the southern half of the wood
- Undertake an initial survey of the pathways to establish problem areas and order of those requiring action.
- Establish a repair strategy with costs. Set up a regular programme for maintaining the main paths
- Discuss with Borough Council the establishment of an annual budget for tree planting and path repairs.
- Keep records of the plants, fungi, birds and butterflies found in the wood. Continue to monitor and record the snowdrop population.

- Recommended by Wildlife Trust in 2019 survey. The Friends to manage and remove small balsam to prevent its spread and take away flowers of the Spanish bluebell.
- Consult visitors about their experiences when visiting the wood. Share findings with Borough Council
- Review current eccentric boundaries for the annual coppice plots with Borough Council and explore potential to re-shape
- Ask Borough to reshape and deepen the ditch along the west boundary, to prevent damage and blockages by cyclists.

14. Resources

Bedford Borough Council employees and Friends of Putnoe Wood and Mowsbury Hillfort. The Friends Group has access to a wide range of hand tools. The Borough Council has a range of power tools, including brush cutters, strimmers, mowers and vehicles. The Council has a general budget for parks and countryside sites which we may be able to draw upon. The Friends will discuss the establishment of a specific budget line for the wood with the Council.

15. Monitoring Performance and Progress.

- Green Flag judges carry out annual visits to review the site
- The Friends Group hold bi-monthly meetings with the Borough Council to review progress and agree actions
- Future surveys of the site by the Wildlife Trust
- Keep records of plants, fungi, birds, butterflies and possibly other groups
- Monitoring of tree planting
- Annual monitoring of path condition

16. Acknowledgements

The plan has been prepared by a Friends working group comprising: Chris Wedge, John Wallace and Dave Parratt. We are also grateful for the helpful input and support from Jon Bishop, Bedford Borough Country Park Warden.