WEST PARK RESERVE

FIVE-YEAR MANAGEMENT PLAN 2020-2025

Dolphin Ecological Surveys

on Behalf of Burgess Hill Town Council

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Location & Summary Description

West Park Reserve covers approximately 2.5ha at central grid reference TQ297195 on the western edge of Burgess Hill. The site is owned and managed by Burgess Hill Town Council (BHTC).

This small site comprises areas of scrub, secondary woodland and grassland with a network of formal and informal paths. Mature trees occur mostly on the site edges.

The site shares its eastern boundary with domestic gardens whilst to the south there is a public footpath and allotments. Malthouse Lane forms the northern boundary of the Reserve and to the west there is low-density housing.

1.2 Previous Management Plans

Five-year management plans for West Park Reserve were written by Kate Ryland of Dolphin Ecological Surveys covering the periods 2005-2010 and 2011-2015.

1.3 The 2020 Management Plan

In early 2020 BHTC commissioned a review of progress at West Park Reserve and a new five-year management plan for the site.

The 2020-2025 management plan for West Park Reserve includes:

- A summary of progress towards meeting the site management objectives from previous plans
- Revised management aims, objectives and prescriptions
- A new 5 year action plan

An updated ecological assessment of West Park Reserve carried out in June 2020 that was based on a desk study, consultation with local naturalists and a walkover field survey is contained in a separate document.

1.4 Public Access

In the past West Park Reserve has suffered from high levels of antisocial behaviour. Despite the best efforts of BHTC most local residents showed little interest in being involved with maintaining the site in good condition.

Over the last decade BHTC has carried out a significant amount of work at West Park Reserve to enhance access and reduce abuses. The situation now appears to be much improved and the Reserve has become more popular with visitors who use it for informal recreation, particularly dog walking.

West Park Reserve now forms a valuable part of the Burgess Hill Green Circle network. There are proposals for the existing footpath along the western edge of the reserve to become part of a new cycleway (Green Link Route 4) that would connect Malthouse Lane to Poveys Close.

2.0 PROGRESS REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT SINCE 2010

2.1 Access Improvement

In 2010 management of the areas of scrub at West Park Nature Reserve had been minimal. The increasingly dense scrub with narrow, winding paths and poor sight lines made parts of the site very dark and unwelcoming. Accumulations of litter added to the impression of neglect.

The main management task recommended in the 2010 Management Plan was to open up areas of scrub by enhancing the path network.

The work that has been carried out has transformed the main paths at West Park Reserve and greatly improved access around the site. In accordance with the 2010 management objectives the main paths have been widened, surfaced and edged in places to provide easy routes for visitors around the site that can be used all year round and which have good sight lines.

Surfaced path through the Reserve

Creating and maintaining the new paths has also increased the amount of light reaching the ground and greatly improved the age structure of scrub. This has promoted the development of much more ecologically valuable edge habitat alongside the paths and has enhanced the wildlife value of the Reserve.

2.2 Grassland Management

In 2010 the recommended management was to cut the main grassland area annually in September/October. This was intended to promote the development of tussocky grassland, which is a valuable habitat for fauna such as invertebrates, reptiles, amphibians and small mammals, whilst keeping encroaching trees and scrub in check.

A 2-3m wide buffer strip was to be retained unmown around the grassland margins to provide over-wintering habitat and promote the development of scrub edge vegetation. These scrubby/tall grass margins were scheduled to be cut in quarters on a 4 year rotation.

Since 2010 the grassland area has been mown by contractors on behalf of BHTC but the cut material has not been removed. Wide, uncut buffer strips have not been retained around the edges of the mown area.

2.3 Scrub Management

The core management recommendations for scrub in the 2010 Management Plan were the path enhancement work, cutting vegetation on path edges and the creation of a 10m x 10m glade in the most dense area of scrub.

The prescription for path edge scrub management comprised cutting 1.5m wide swathes of vegetation annually in winter to prevent scrub encroaching onto the paths and to enhance edge habitat.

All the recommended management of scrub has been carried out very successfully by BHTC staff and have produced the anticipated benefits to the scrub habitat complexity and age structure.

2.4 Annual Tree Survey

Annual tree surveys and essential safety work were scheduled to continue for the duration of the 2010 Management Plan.

This work already forms part of BHTC routine tree inspection work and has been carried out successfully.

2.5 Interpretation, Survey, Monitoring & Review

The 2010 Management Plan included outline recommendations for possible interpretation, survey and monitoring work that could be carried out at West Park Reserve, however, the priority was to improve access and safety for visitors to the site.

Taking forward aspirations for interpretive material, photographic monitoring and wildlife surveys were clearly dependent on reducing antisocial behaviour and increasing community involvement at the site.

In the absence of substantial community support from local residents, little progress with survey and monitoring work has been possible so far.

Management Progress Summary Table

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS IN 2010-2015 PLAN	PROGRESS/OUTCOME
Creation of new, surfaced path network	**Done** This has been extremely successful
Path maintenance by annual trimming of 1.5m wide strips of scrub on edges	**Good** Regular path edge management has been very successful for access and for habitat development
Mowing unsurfaced grassland paths regularly from spring to autumn	This has not usually been carried out in the past but commenced in summer 2020
Mowing grassland and removing cuttings annually	**Moderate** The grassland has been cut annually but the cuttings have not been removed. A more nuanced mowing regime is needed
Rotational management of 2-3m wide long grass and scrub margins around the grassland (¼ per year)	**Moderate** Some good edge habitat has developed around the grassland edges but the rotational cutting has not taken place
Creation of 10m x 10m glade in dense scrub	**Done** A large glade created in the dense scrub has helped to diversify habitat structure
Annual tree survey and essential safety work	**Done**
Consider installing interpretive boards	The level of antisocial behaviour precluded installing interpretive boards but this should now be re-considered
Fixed-point photo monitoring	This recommended monitoring action has not yet begun
Wildlife surveys as resources allow	Resources have not been available for wildlife surveys to date and suitable volunteers have not yet been identified
Review of Management Plan	Plan reviewed and updated 2020

3.0 MANAGEMENT AIMS & OBJECTIVES

3.1 Management Aims

- To provide a safe area for informal recreation where visitors can enjoy wildlife
- To maintain and enhance the habitats and biodiversity at West Park Reserve through appropriate management
- To encourage more wildlife recording at West Park Nature Reserve

3.2 Objectives

- Elimination of antisocial behaviour at West Park Reserve & reduction of garden and other waste dumping from adjoining properties
- Creating enhanced grassland habitat with a more diverse sward and complex, species-rich edge habitats
- Maintaining increasingly structurally diverse and species-rich scrub and woodland habitats
- Increasing the amount of information collected about the wildlife present at West Park Nature Reserve and using the data to inform management decisions

4.0 MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTIONS

4.1 Scrub & Woodland

4.1.1 Path Edges

The scrub and tall vegetation along path edges should continue to be selectively cut back as necessary to keep paths open. A strip of approximately 1.5m wide should be cut along all path edges once a year in winter.

The path edge management zone could be extended back more than 1.5m into areas of leggy scrub to create wider scallops and bays in places alongside the main paths. This would be particularly valuable on the western and southern edges of the site where some of the scrub is quite even-aged.

A section of path where wide scallops could be created

4.1.2 Tree Management

Continued selective woodland and tree management is needed to promote more structural complexity in the scrub and woodland habitats and to create a wider range of tree age classes. This should include thinning approximately 10% of even-aged young Oak saplings in alternate years within the central, woodland habitat areas.

There is a row of mature Poplar trees along the southern boundary of West Park Reserve. These trees are very tall and some are beginning to lean (which is typical of some Poplar species). Under very windy conditions these trees could pose a safety risk to visitors if they fell.

Consideration should be given to either the selective reduction of the height of these trees or to their gradual removal and replacement with a long-lived, native species such as Pedunculate Oak. For ecological reasons the decision to fell mature trees should not be taken lightly but visitor safety must also be considered. The advice given by a specialist tree surgeon should be followed.

Signs of Ash dieback disease are evident at West Park Reserve and monitoring tree health is part of BHTC routine tree inspections. Dead or dying Ash trees should only be removed if they pose a safety risk.

Wherever possible deadwood that occurs in the crowns of trees and which has fallen to the ground should be continue to be retained as wildlife habitat. Dead limbs in trees should only be removed if they are considered to pose a threat to the safety of visitors.

West Park Reserve is a small site with a history of vandalism, although site abuses have been very successfully reduced in recent years. For this reason BHTC staff who are responsible for site management will need to exercise their own judgement when deciding how to carry out the

recommended woodland and scrub management actions within this Plan. For example, thinning trees and clearing scrub will be very beneficial for biodiversity but the cut material may be used to light fires if it is retained on site as habitat piles. Alternatively there may be scope to use brash and cut thorny scrub to create dead hedging that restricts access and stops new paths opening up. A degree of flexibility is essential to allow the most pragmatic decisions to be made on this site.

4.1.3 Introduced Species

There are several introduced species present in the wooded parts of West Park Reserve, notably Snowberry, Cherry Laurel and Portugal Laurel. There are also occasional non-native conifers as well as plants that arise as garden discards and subsequently become established.

The discarded garden plants should be removed regularly and disposed of off-site. Selective control of the more established and potentially invasive woody species should be carried out to prevent them spreading across the site.

The priority should be reduction of the quite extensive stands of Snowberry which are concentrated on the northern and western site edges with a smaller clump in the southeast (see Site Sketch Map). Ideally the above-ground plants should be cut back and the roots removed as far as possible. However, it may eventually require some selective use of herbicide to prevent re-growth from persistent rootstock to control this woody species effectively.

The scattered Laurel shrubs within the Reserve should be cut back and the re-growth either treated with herbicide or repeatedly cut back.

There are scattered non-native conifers on the site but these are not a priority for removal. They are unlikely to spread and they may provide useful habitat for nesting birds.

4.2 Grassland

The grassland sward is generally tussocky and dominated by grasses although there are wildflower species present in places. More nuanced management of this part of West Park Reserve is needed to enhance its wildlife value and to increase its accessibility for visitors.

The tussocky grassland is likely to support a suite of native fauna that depend more on the sward structure than its component species, for example generalist invertebrates, small mammals, amphibians and reptiles. It is therefore important to adopt a management regime that will retain the habitat structure whilst also enhancing the overall value of the grassland to wildlife by promoting a higher proportion of herbs to grasses.

It is recommended that 50% of the grassland area is cut each year and the cuttings collected. Cut material can either be stacked in a corner of the site or alternatively removed to a green waste site for composting. The grassland mowing regime needs to be consistent and the cut material must be removed to prevent further accumulation of a thatch of dead vegetation.

A 2-3m wide margin around the edges of the grassland area should be managed to promote a tall grass/scrubby habitat adjoining the secondary woodland and scrub habitats. This edge zone should be cut on a 4-year rotation such that 25% of the vegetation is cut each year.

The aim should be to maintain the overall extent of grassland habitat and prevent scrub encroaching into the open area. It may be necessary to shorten the edge management rotation to 3 years if the growth of Bramble and scrub is very vigorous. This will need to be a decision made by BHTC staff based on seasonal growth rates.

Paths around the grassland area are not surfaced (see below) but should be mown regularly through the growing season to improve access around this part of the site. In addition a new path should be mown and maintained across the grassland (see Sketch Map) to divide the area into 2 roughly equal sized management compartments.

There is a length of redundant metal fencing between the grassland and the woodland area which should be removed.

4.3 Access & Interpretation

4.3.1 Paths

Some heavily used sections of the unsurfaced path network tend to become very muddy in wet weather and especially in the winter months. This is most noticeable in the north and west of the grassland area where the clay soils tend to get waterlogged but it also occurs in some parts of the woodland.

Waterlogged section of path in the grassland area

Rather than create more surfaced paths within the Reserve it would be possible to consolidate and increase the drainage of sections of the unsurfaced paths surfaces that are prone to waterlogging by using an unbound, surface application of locally sourced crushed sandstone. It is preferable to use material that is locally sourced rather than imported or transported long distances.

Adding crushed sandstone would help to increase the natural drainage of compacted clay paths and reduce the amount of surface water or deep mud that accumulates. It also has the advantage of having a similar pH to the local clay soil, unlike the most commonly used unbound path materials such as Type 1 imported aggregates.

The proposed Green Link Route 4 cycleway would follow the existing surfaced footpath along the western edge of West Park Reserve. The existing wide path appears to be sufficiently robust to convert into a cycleway without any changes needed (no specification for the proposed cycleway was available at the time of writing). However, BHTC would need to monitor impacts on the path surface if the cycleway goes ahead to ensure there is no excessive wear or damage.

4.3.2 Interpretation

Installing interpretive boards at the main site entrances would be an excellent way to encourage greater community appreciation of West Park Reserve and perhaps encourage visitors to have more involvement with wildlife recording or management of the site.

If the proposed new cycleway route across West Park Reserve is formalised then new interpretive boards could be installed to coincide with this development.

4.4 Garden Encroachment & Dumping

Garden waste and other materials appear to be dumped onto the Reserve from some of the properties along its eastern boundary. There are also signs of encroachment onto BHTC land from adjoining gardens.

Discouraging this type of fly-tipping and abuses of the site requires regular monitoring by BHTC staff and communication with local residents.

There is no easy answer to this problem but as the Reserve continues to become more popular with visitors a consequent increase in community involvement with the site may lead to a reduction of antisocial behaviour.

4.5 Survey & Monitoring

BHTC carry out regular site inspections at least every 2 weeks and also respond to particular problems reported by visitors.

Further surveys of the wildlife at West Park would be very valuable and the results could help to refine future management decisions. The type of survey work possible will depend on the resources available to pay for contractors or recruiting more skilled volunteer naturalists.

The key monitoring activities should focus on the structure and diversity of the habitats present. Repeating of the walkover surveys that have been carried out in 2005 and 2020 would give a broad measure of any changes to plant species richness, habitat diversity and the potential value of the Reserve to wildlife. A repeat walkover survey in 2024/5 would provide information to support the management plan review in 2025.

In recent years Burgess Hill has been found to support numerous populations of the Brown Hairstreak butterfly, which is a national conservation priority species (see Appendix). This species lays its eggs on Blackthorn scrub so it may occur at West Park Reserve.

Brown Hairstreak egg surveys of the site are recommended because if this species is present then the management of the extensive areas of Blackthorn scrub could be fine-tuned to provide optimum habitat for the butterfly. There are suitably skilled local people already involved with volunteer work on other sites who may be willing to undertake this survey.

Ideally a Friends of West Park Reserve group should be set up, although this initiative has been attempted by BHTC in the past and not met with any success to date. It is possible that the Friends of the Burgess Hill Green Circle network could help to encourage greater community involvement with the site. Members of such a group could potentially carry out some wildlife surveys and monitoring themselves.

There is currently very little information about the fauna that occurs in West Park Reserve (see Appendix). Encouraging local volunteers with suitable expertise to submit records of wildlife they observe on the site will help to build up a picture of its ecological value and specific management requirements.

All visitors to the site should be encouraged to report their wildlife sightings at West Park Reserve via the iRecord website/app (https://www.brc.ac.uk/irecord/).

The iNaturalist website (https://www.inaturalist.org/) is particularly helpful in promoting citizen science wildlife recording.

Monitoring habitat structure and large-scale changes by taking annual fixed-point photographs of the site can be very effective. This would be a suitable way to generate a visual record of the development and structure of the vegetation on West Park Reserve and could be a suitable task for members of a Friends Group.

With any management plan it is important to review progress and ensure that the management is meeting site objectives. This management plan should be reviewed and updated in 2025.

4.6 Local Nature Reserve Status

BHTC should consider whether it is appropriate to give West Park Nature Reserve formal recognition as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR). This is a statutory site designation and Local Authorities can declare LNRs under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. BHTC would be able to declare a LNR if this power has been delegated to them by Mid Sussex District Council.

LNRs are declared and managed for nature conservation and are intended to provide opportunities for people to have contact with nature, for education and for research. The requirement for a proposed LNR to have a conservation management plan would be met by this current document.

The process to declare a LNR is quite simple and Defra guidance can be found at:

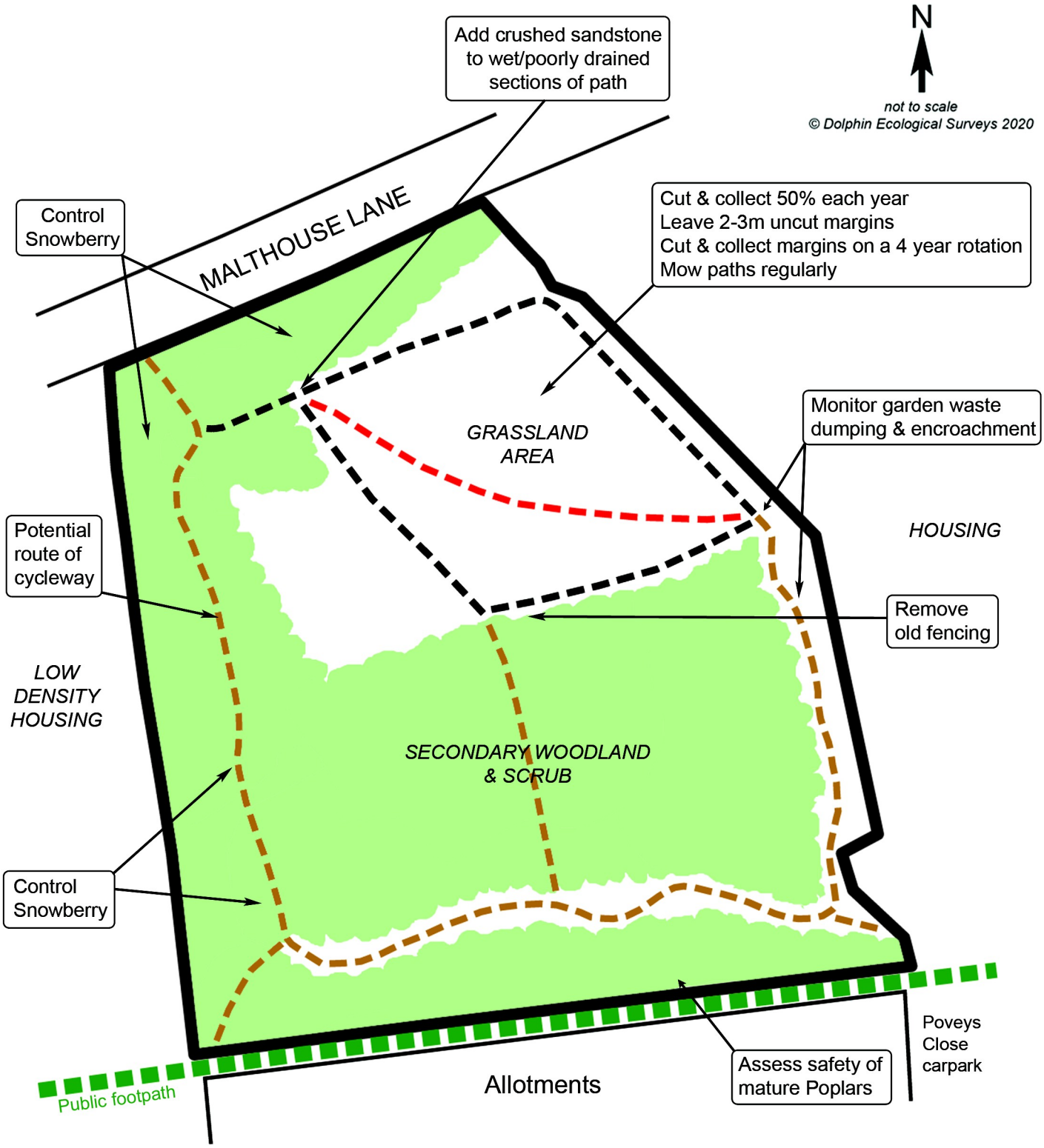
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/create-and-manage-local-nature-reserves

5.0 FIVE YEAR WORK PLAN 2020-2025

MANAGEMENT TASK	TIMING	YEAR				
		2020	2021	2023	2024	2025
Path Edges Cut back approximately 1.5m band of scrub and tall herb vegetation alongside paths. Create deeper bays and scallops into even-aged or leggy scrub	Winter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Management Thin 10% even-aged Oaks in central woodland area	November-February	✓		✓		✓
Tree Management Assess mature Poplars on southern boundary for safety. Consider selective removal and replacement or height reduction under advice from a tree surgeon	November-December	✓				
Tree Management Monitor ash for signs of die-back but only remove affected trees when essential for safety	As necessary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Introduced Species Control Cut back Snowberry shrubs and pull roots Treat re-growth with herbicide only if manual control fails	Winter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Introduced Species Control Cut Laurel shrubs and either cut back or treat re-growth	Winter		✓	✓	✓	✓
Introduced Species Control Remove any discarded garden plants that become established	As necessary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grassland Mowing Cut 50% of the grassland in alternate years and remove cuttings. Leave 2-3m uncut margins next to scrub edges	Late September/October	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grassland/Scrub Margins Cut long grass and scrub margins on a 4-year rotation (25% each year). Review growth rates and reduce rotation length to 3 years if necessary.	January-February	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

MANAGEMENT TASK	TIMING	YEAR				
		2020	2021	2023	2024	2025
Access & Interpretation Consolidate waterlogged path sections using locally sourced crushed sandstone						
Access & Interpretation Monitor impacts of proposed cycleway on the footpath surface	Ongoing if the cycleway goes ahead		✓	✓	✓	✓
Access & Interpretation Install interpretive boards at site entrances	At cycleway launch or when resources allow		✓			
Garden Encroachment & Dumping Monitor dumping and engage with local residents as much as possible	Ongoing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Habitat Monitoring Repeat the walkover habitat survey	June				✓	
Brown Hairstreak Egg Survey Arrange a Brown Hairstreak egg search survey	February		✓		✓	
Community Involvement Establish a Friends of West Park Reserve Group if possible	ASAP	✓				
Wildlife Recording Encourage volunteer naturalists and visitors to submit wildlife sightings via iRecord and iNaturalist	Ongoing	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Photographic Monitoring Take fixed point photographs of the site	At least annually and ideally more often		✓	✓	✓	✓
Local Nature Reserve Status Consider whether to declare West Park a Local Nature Reserve			✓			
Management Plan Review Review and update the management plan	Spring					✓

West Park Reserve Sketch Map & Management Summary



Key

- Main unsurfaced paths
- Main surfaced paths
- Approximate route of new mown path

Management Summary

- Cut back vegetation on path edges & create scallops
- Thin young Oaks
- Control intoduced species
- Cut & collect grassland area
- Retain unmown buffers around grassland
- Cut grassland/scrub edges on rotation
- Add crushed sanstone to paths where needed

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