

Ruscombe Parish Neighbourhood Plan

Phase 2: Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure enhancement opportunities.

Client: Ruscombe Neighbourhood Plan Group

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1 Summary

Thirteen projects that will enhance the biodiversity of Ruscombe Parish by making existing wildlife sites 'bigger, better and more joined' are identified, and a description of each potential project provided.

These descriptions follow the format of a simple management plan with a vision stating the desired state; an evaluation describing the current state; and objectives and prescription explaining how the vision might be achieved.

2 Introduction

Ruscombe is a very rural parish adjacent to the urban area of Twyford and just three kilometres from the outskirts of Reading. Its rural nature means that the parish has a high potential for supporting lots of wildlife but its proximity to Reading, Maidenhead and ultimately London, puts it at risk from development that could damage the wildlife interest.

This document uses information obtained in the previous report (Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure elements) to identify a number of projects that will enhance the biodiversity in Ruscombe Parish.

A walkover survey of the key habitats across the parish was undertaken, and further information about the Local Wildlife Sites was obtained from the Thames Valley Records Centre.

3 General principles

Biodiversity is a measure of the variety of plants, animals and other species that are found in an area. High biodiversity normally means that the wildlife is resilient and more able to cope with potentially damaging external influences.

Regular reports by the State of Nature Partnership indicate a dramatic decline in the United Kingdom's biodiversity in recent years. (SoNP, 2019)

The Government's review of England's wildlife sites in 2010, titled 'Making Space for Nature' recommended that, in order to halt and reverse the decline in the country's biodiversity, wildlife sites need to be 'bigger, better and joined'. (Lawton, 2010)

This means that areas that are already good for wildlife need to be managed to make them even better, opportunities should be sought to increase their size, and wildlife 'corridors' or 'stepping stones' should be created to allow wildlife to migrate between them.

These measures should allow wildlife to better cope with the human impacts of habitat loss, pollution, disturbance and climate change.

In Ruscombe Parish, the areas that that are likely to support the most wildlife have been designated as Local Wildlife Sites; a non-statutory designation that offers some protection against development.

Any projects that are recommended to benefit biodiversity should focus on these Local Wildlife Sites, or other areas of high biodiversity that are identified, and should aim to:

- improve them for wildlife through appropriate management,
- make them bigger by improving surrounding land for wildlife,
- and join them together with linear features that are good for wildlife.

4 Sites of high wildlife value

The previous report, (Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure elements) identified a number of areas with the potential to support a relatively high biodiversity:

	Area or length
Ancient Woodland	14ha
Non-ancient woodland	53ha
Watercourses	3700m
Priority Habitat – Broadleaved Woodland (includes ancient and non-ancient)	45ha
Priority Habitat – Lowland Meadow	1ha
Hedgerow	1700m
Parkland	30ha
Urban area	Approx. 40ha
Ruscombe Parish - total	523 ha

Of these areas, five have been designated as Local Wildlife Sites. It is likely that they are the most important sites in Ruscombe Parish for wildlife.

They are:

- Ruscombe and Vale Woods
- Ruscombe Village Pond
- Windsor Ait
- Wingwood Copse
- Grassland Opposite Blackthorn Farm

5 Recommended projects to enhance biodiversity

Using the above information and following a site visit with a local expert to the areas with the most potential, the following projects have been identified to deliver the principles (better, bigger and joined) in the 'Making Space for Nature' report.

5.1 Promote improved hedgerow management across the parish.

5.1.1 Vision

The hedgerows in Ruscombe Parish will provide a wide range of resources for wildlife throughout the year: cover for nesting and moving through an otherwise open landscape; food in the form of pollen, nectar, berries and foliage; shade and shelter from the wind.

A good quality hedgerow:

- Is linked to other hedges and woodland across the landscape
- Is part of a structurally diverse system of hedges
- Is varied in species composition
- Is dense and wide
- Is covered in flowers and fruit
- Includes some taller trees along its length
- Has 'outgrowths' – sections where a clump of scrub has grown out into the field
- Has dense, tussocky, grassy vegetation directly adjacent to it
- Has flower-rich margins surrounding it.

5.1.2 Evaluation

Many of the hedges seen during the walkover survey do not show the features listed above and therefore their potential for supporting wildlife is not fully realised.

Hedges are often 'over-managed' by severe annual cutting. This can lead to a loss of plant species and the creation of an 'open', 'leggy' structure that is not optimal for wildlife. Very few in-hedgerow trees were seen.

Some hedges had been recently laid; an excellent, traditional method of producing a wildlife-rich hedge.

5.1.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 1.1 Make information about best-practise hedgerow management available to landowners.

Lots of information on good hedgerow management is available for landowners. Hedgeline (www.hedgeline.org.uk) for example provides a useful website.

All of the qualities of a good hedgerow can be encouraged by managing them on an approximately 20-year cycle, following guidance in The Complete Hedge Good Management Guide from Hedgeline:

www.hedgeline.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/30_complete_good_hedge_management_guide_leaflet.pdf

All work on hedges should take place in the winter.

The cycle starts with coppicing, laying or replanting then progresses to a rotational cutting regime in which a third of the length of all the hedges are cut each year, but allowing the hedge to increase in size by about 10cm each cut.

Finally, as the cycle nears its end and the hedge begins to get 'gappy', the hedge should be left to grow for a couple of years and then laid again.

This management regime can save money over time by reducing the amount of cutting required.

Relevant leaflets could be purchased or printed by the Parish Council and provided to landowners or details of the website made available. Individuals providing advice should do so with an understanding of the landowner's situation so that advice can be tailored.

Objective 1.2 Facilitate the traditional management on select hedgerows.

The traditional management of hedges requires skill and experience, and is labour-intensive, but it produces a more attractive and wildlife-friendly hedgerow.

Conservation volunteer groups often include individuals who have the skills and experience required. They could, with the landowner's approval, undertake hedge laying in appropriate locations.

5.2 Promote the recruitment of young trees in parkland habitat.

5.2.1 Vision

Areas of parkland in Ruscombe will have a large number of veteran trees that are home to all sorts of beetles and other insects. The pasture below them will be flower-rich. There will be patches of scrub through which young trees – the future veterans – will grow.

5.2.2 Evaluation

Although rich in veteran trees, many areas of parkland suffer from a lack of recruitment of younger trees. As the veterans die from disease or drought, younger trees are required to ensure the continuity of suitable habitat.

5.2.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 2.1 Increase the number of young trees in parkland.

If trees in an area of parkland are of a similar age and there are few younger trees growing to take their place in the future, management can be carried out to provide replacements.

In a natural situation, trees tend to grow up protected from grazing by stands of thorny scrub. This could be tolerated in areas of parkland but not at the expense of the loss of too much grassland.

In order to ensure the recruitment of trees, new saplings should be encouraged to mature. Ideally these should be trees that have set seed naturally and are already growing. If suitable specimens can be found, scattered across the parkland, they should be protected from grazing or mowing by fencing, designed to last at least ten years. Appropriate species would be Oak, Beech, Field Maple or Hawthorn.

Alternatively, if no suitable specimens can be located, trees can be planted. These should be sourced from local, native stock to ensure that they are disease free and suited to the local environment. Smaller individual trees tend to grow better, but will need protective fencing.

5.3 Encourage and facilitate landowners to enter a Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

5.3.1 Vision

Landowners in Ruscombe Parish will be paid to provide public benefits, including increased biodiversity, natural flood management and improved access to the countryside. At least one significant landowner in the parish will have entered a government grant scheme.

5.3.2 Evaluation

There are currently no landowners in environmental stewardship schemes within the parish.

These schemes pay landowners, normally farmers, to manage their land in a way that will benefit the environment. Most of this money comes from the European Union, but the Government has made some assurances that a similar scheme will continue after Brexit.

Many landowners already provide substantial benefits to the environment by looking after their land with wildlife in mind. As the profile of biodiversity loss and climate change are raised, and the concept of Natural Capital gains popularity, it is likely that increased funding will be made available to landowners to offset any loss of income caused by their delivery of 'ecosystem services'.

Environmental Stewardship schemes can provide funding for improved hedgerow management, provision of wildlife-friendly areas within the farm, tree planting and woodland management, for example.

5.3.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 3.1 One significant landowner in an environmental stewardship scheme.

The complexity of the application process and the five-year commitment often discourage landowners from entering the scheme.

Assistance from an experienced consultant to help choose options and complete the application process is often welcomed by the landowner. Advice is available from organisations like the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, FWAG South East, or independent consultants like the author.

5.4 Enhance the natural corridor to the south of Castle End Business Park.

5.4.1 Vision

The land adjacent to the bridleway heading south from Castle End Business Park will provide a wildlife corridor linking up nearby hedgerows and areas of woodland. The pond will be maintained to encourage dragonflies and frogs and areas of grassland will become wildflower-rich.

This will create a pleasant lunchtime walk for people from the business park.

5.4.2 Evaluation

This bridleway passes through arable fields with a parallel shallow ditch along much of its length. A hedge follows about one third of the route, and there is a

small copse containing a pond about halfway along. At the northern end there is a patch of scrubby grassland and a few trees.

It is assumed that the Business Park has control over the grassy area to the north, and the farmer is responsible for the land over which the bridleway passes. This will need to be confirmed and approval sought from each before progressing.

5.4.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 4.1 Obtain approval for the project from the relevant organisation or individuals.

Members of the parish council are likely to know the relevant landowners, but otherwise land registry will be able to provide details.

Objective 4.2 Plant a hedge along the length of the bridleway, and maintain it appropriately.

The existing hedge can have its gaps filled and extended to link the road to the south and the business park to the north. Appropriate species should be selected to reflect the plants found in nearby hedges with hawthorn, Blackthorn, Elder, Field Maple and Hazel are likely to be suitable.

There is lots of advice for planting hedgerows here:

http://www.hedgeline.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/75_ne_hedgerow_planting.pdf

Objective 4.3 Increase the variety of wild flowers in the grassy area.

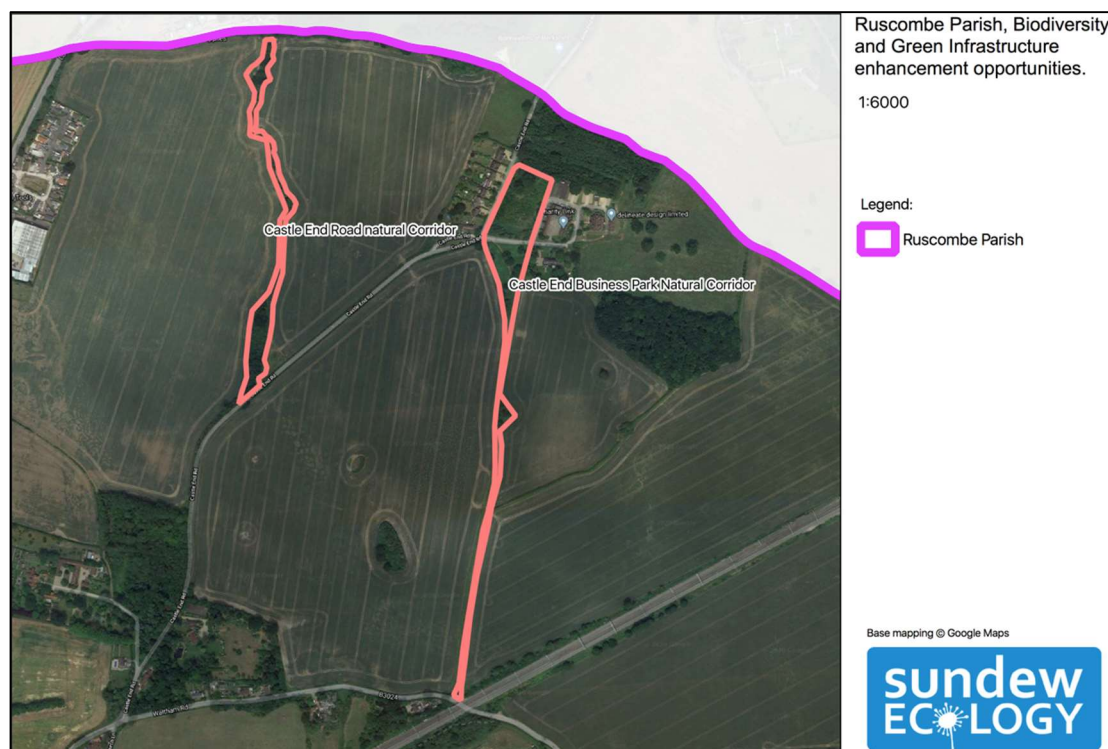
A similar prescription to Objective 2.2 should be followed here.

Where areas of bramble are considered to be too extensive, they can be reduced in extent through frequent mowing, although bramble is an important resource for wildlife and provides an easy introduction to wild foraging.

Objective 4.4 Increase the diversity in the pond and surrounding copse through appropriate management.

In order to increase the diversity of the vegetation surrounding the pond it can be coppiced on rotation, approximately one tenth each year in blocks. This will allow more light into the pond, encouraging increased floating and emergent vegetation that will, in turn, encourage more aquatic animal species to use the pond.

5.4.4 Map



5.5 Enhance the natural corridor heading north from Castle End Road.

5.5.1 Vision

The small strip of woodland to the north of Castle End Road will be carpeted with woodland flowers that will begin to spread along the hedges parallel to road and the newly planted hedgerow across the fields to the north. The ancient Field Maple coppice stools will thrive and the wood will be a refuge for a host of wildlife.

5.5.2 Evaluation

There is currently a small strip of woodland immediately to the north Castle End Road. This is evidently an old trackway heading north: the ground is raised, and a row of veteran coppiced Field Maple trees denotes the former route. A belt of scrubby Hazel adjacent to the Field Maples has Bluebells growing beneath it.

The meandering former hedge to the north of this woodland is now a row of young trees, offering reduced cover to the wildlife that may want to move between areas of woodland to the north and south.

5.5.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 5.1 Obtain approval for the project from the relevant organisation or individuals.

It is likely that the woodland and hedgerow are owned by the farmer of the surrounding fields. Members of the parish council are likely to know the relevant landowners, but otherwise land registry will be able to provide details.

Objective 5.2 Manage the strip of woodland to maximise its potential for wildlife.

Careful, rotational coppicing of small coupes is likely to be beneficial to this diminutive woodland. Protection against deer and rabbit browsing will be essential to ensure successful regrowth.

Objective 5.3 Implement a suitable restoration programme for the hedgerow to the north of the woodland strip.

It is likely that this line of trees will require coppicing, gapping-up and protection from browsing in order to restore its condition. More information can be found here:

http://www.hedgeline.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/78_hedgeline_a5_12pp_leaflet_7.pdf

5.5.4 Map – see map for Project 5.

5.6 Promote the appropriate maintenance of ditches across the parish to benefit Water Voles.

5.6.1 Vision

A network of the ditches across the parish will be suitable for a Water Vole reintroduction programme.

They will have species-rich, tall emergent and bankside vegetation. The American Mink population will be reduced and disturbance through inappropriate management will be kept to a minimum.

5.6.2 Evaluation

There is an extensive network of ditches and streams across the parish. Some of these are a remnant of the huge Ruscombe Lake that was drained in 1820. The wetlands surrounding Windsor Ait may also offer restoration potential.

Water Voles are likely to have become extinct from the Parish before 2012 when they were last recorded in nearby Hurst. They require tall vegetation on which to feed, plenty of water in the ditches and banks suitable for burrowing.

American Mink, now common across the wetlands of England, are a major predator of Water Voles, so some control may be desirable.

The vegetation adjacent to many of the ditches seen in Ruscombe Parish was closely mown making them unsuitable for Water Voles, although the area was visited in winter and mowing may have been recently undertaken.

5.6.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 6.1 Increase the extent of vegetation suitable for Water Voles.

Water Voles feed on vegetation adjacent to slow-moving waterways. They need tall vegetation in which to hide and dig their burrows. Leaving a strip of unmown vegetation along ditches may encourage Water Voles to increase their extent if they are still present, or produce conditions suitable for reintroduction. Such management will also benefit other water-loving species.

More advice can be found here:

<https://ptes.org/campaigns/water-voles/helping-water-voles-on-your-land/>

Objective 6.2 Implement a Mink control programme.

Mink have a significant impact on Water Vole populations. Control efforts are undertaken in nearby wetlands, and it would be beneficial to extend this to Ruscombe. Such measures would need to be undertaken in a structured programme to ensure success.

5.7 Promote a 'wildlife friendly gardening scheme' to residents.

5.7.1 Vision

At least ten per cent of the area of residential gardens, playing fields and other green spaces will be maintained to maximise their potential for wildlife.

Grass will be left to grow tall, pollinator-friendly flowers will be encouraged and some gardens will contain wildlife ponds.

Advice will be available and gardeners will be encouraged by friendly competition or an award scheme.

5.7.2 Evaluation

Gardens are an increasingly important resource for wildlife in England. Together they cover more land than all of the National Nature Reserves, and they have a great potential for enhancement.

A small area of the lawn left unmown will encourage grasshoppers, beetles and slow worms to visit; a suitable pond is probably the best way of accommodating wildlife in a garden; and nectar and pollen-rich flowers will

attract butterflies and bees. Feeding birds and providing nest boxes provides much-needed resources, now often scarce in the wider countryside.

5.7.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 7.1 Deliver a 'gardening for wildlife' promotion scheme.

A number of organisations and local authorities promote wildlife gardening through schemes ranging from the simple provision of advice to presenting awards for wildlife gardening. Wild Maidenhead organises the 'Wild About Gardens Award Scheme' (www.wildmaidenhead.org.uk/waga-offline) and the Royal Horticultural Society and Wildlife Trusts have a web site with lots of useful information (wildaboutgardens.org.uk/).

5.8 Enhance the wildlife value of the many ponds across the parish.

5.8.1 Vision

All of the ponds across the parish will be maintained with wildlife in mind. They will have clean water, some of which will be free of vegetation. Floating, emergent and bankside vegetation will be varied in both species composition and structure. This will provide lots of resources that attract a wide range of wildlife including amphibians, aquatic insects, birds and bats that feed on the insects over the water.

5.8.2 Evaluation

The author visited three ponds in February 2020, although there are innumerable ponds across the parish.

The village pond, a Local Wildlife Site primarily because of the presence of Great Crested Newts, is well looked after. It has all of the qualities mentioned in the vision, above.

The other two ponds seen were dominated by tall, scrubby vegetation that, while it has its value for visiting and nesting birds and some aquatic insects prefer shaded ponds, they are likely to benefit from some vegetation management.

5.8.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 8.1 Gain a better understanding of the number and condition of ponds in the parish

A study of detailed maps will identify the significant ponds. They will need to be visited to undertake a simple survey of their condition. This could consist of a quick species survey (for example see <https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/get-involved-2/big-pond-dip/>) or a more detailed habitat survey

(<https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/HABITAT-MANUAL-FINAL.pdf>).

These surveys will identify priorities for management. Ponds that should be prioritised are those that are assessed as being in poor condition, especially those that are isolated and provide a relatively rare resource in the landscape.

Objective 8.2 Improve the condition of two or more ponds in the parish.

For the ponds that have been identified as being a priority for habitat management, the landowners approval should be sought to undertake appropriate management, as determined by the survey.

This may include management of the vegetation surrounding the pond or within it, or efforts to improve the quality of the water entering the pond from road or agricultural run off.

5.9 Promote appropriate management of the woodlands, especially ancient woodland, across the parish.

5.9.1 Vision

Woodland will be home to a considerable variety of wildlife. Birds will find plenty of opportunities to nest in hollow trees and dense scrub, butterflies will flit along open, flower-rich rides, and spring flowers will carpet the ground – taking advantage of clearings in the wood.

5.9.2 Evaluation

Approximately 67 hectares (10%) of Ruscombe Parish is covered in woodland. Two block of woodland have been designated as Local Wildlife Sites (see citation document, appended) and so may be assumed to be in good condition. The condition of the other woodlands is not known. Many small woods suffer from a lack of appropriate maintenance, leaving them dark, uniform and lacking in wildlife.

One of the Local Wildlife Sites, Ruscombe and Vale Woods is under positive management by a local wildlife conservation group and it would be beneficial to either encourage landowners to undertake positive management or facilitate the volunteer group to undertake management in nearby woods.

Woodland in good condition will have a vibrant ground flora, a well-developed understorey and areas of open habitat. There will be plenty of dead wood and a diverse mix of tree species and sizes.

5.9.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 9.1 Gain an understanding of the condition of woodland in the parish

After obtaining consent from the landowner, the woodlands can be visited and their condition assessed using a standard survey method (eg <https://woodlandwildlifetoolkit.sylva.org.uk/assess>).

This will identify which woodlands are in need of management to achieve good condition, and what management is required.

Objective 9.2 Achieve good condition for at least one woodland currently in poor condition.

In order to maximise wildlife diversity, management such as coppicing, ride creation, removal of exotic species and in-fill planting are often required. The type and extent of the management required will be informed by the results of the survey work.

The products of the management, such as firewood or hazel stakes, can often be used to offset the cost of management.

5.10 Monitor the quality of priority grassland habitats and provide advice to landowners if required.

5.10.1 Vision

Grassland identified as 'priority habitat' will be recognised as important by its owner and will be managed sympathetically to maximise its value to wildlife.

5.10.2 Evaluation

There is currently one patch of grassland mapped as 'lowland meadow'; a priority habitat, in Ruscombe Parish. This small field has been designated a Local Wildlife Site (see citation document, appended), and is currently used as a horse paddock.

The Local Wildlife Designation does not impose any obligations on the landowner, but should offer it some protection against development.

5.10.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 10.1 Ensure that the owner is aware of the importance of their field and has access to suitable advice.

Although landowners often do not like being told what to do with their land, they are normally receptive to friendly, helpful advice. A letter explaining the significance of their land and some pointers to appropriate advice can be sent to the owner or tenant.

5.11 Manage the verges and communal green spaces to benefit pollinators and other species.

5.11.1 Vision

Many of the road verges and green open spaces will be dominated by long, flower-rich vegetation for much of the year. This creates a network of wildlife 'corridors' linking hedgerows, woodlands and other natural areas and allowing plants and animals to spread across the parish.

These areas will be attractive to the residents and will be sited to not cause a danger to road users.

5.11.2 Evaluation

Across the UK many of the verges and green open spaces are kept mown short, and free from wildflowers. They look neat to the casual passer-by but are often devoid of wildlife.

Added together, all of the road verges and other green spaces form a significant potential space for wildlife.

Leaving the verges left uncut for the summer will encourage all sorts of wildlife and can save time and money on reduced mowing.

5.11.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 11.1 Manage as many verges for wildlife as practical

Working with the highways authority, verges that can be managed with wildlife in mind should be identified and guidance (eg <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/managing-land-wildlife/how-manage-road-verge-wildlife>) followed. This can include a change in mowing regime and introducing wildflowers.

Part of this guidance advises that local people know and understand the reasons for the change in management routine. This is crucial to ensure that the changes have the support of local residents and councillors.

5.12 Promote a greater understanding of the biodiversity of Ruscombe Parish to its residents.

5.12.1 Vision

The residents will have a good understanding of the natural environment across the parish. They will value the green spaces and will campaign for enhancement and against inappropriate development.

More residents will be involved in conservation volunteering and will visit the countryside frequently to enjoy their surroundings.

5.12.2 Evaluation

There is currently an active group of conservation volunteers with an inspirational and knowledgeable leader. This group could deliver more of the projects identified in this report if it were boosted by more members.

This part of Berkshire is under constant threat from development. One effective argument against development is the presence of protected species and habitats. If more people are involved in enhancing their environment, recording wildlife sightings and enjoying green spaces then the argument against development becomes more powerful.

5.12.3 Objectives and prescription

Objective 12.1 Design a self-guided walk around the parish, highlighting and interpreting the important environmental features.

People are more likely to value the countryside if they are able to access it and understand what makes it special. A route, taking people around the main highlights, could be designed and a supporting leaflet or website produced. This could include a GIS route so that mobile devices can be used for navigation. The leaflet, or website, could explain the wildlife present in the different habitats throughout the year.

Objective 12.2 Encourage more people to get involved in looking after or protecting the natural habitats found in Ruscombe.

An organisation with similar aims and activities to Wild Maidenhead (<https://www.wildmaidenhead.org.uk/>) could be set up to promote engagement with the natural environment. A representative from Wild Maidenhead will be happy to meet and help set up such a body.

If enthusiastic individuals are identified they could be recruited as volunteer work party leaders. TCV (<https://www.tcv.org.uk/>) has lots of advice on forming and running such groups.

6 References

SoNP, 2019:

<https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

Lawton, 2010:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402154501/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

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