



Southern Country Park

GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN, 2023 - 2028

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

Produced by:



On behalf of:



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1. INTRODUCTION

A new five-year Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) is being produced for Southern Country Park. This briefing document provides an overview of how the GAP will be produced and sets out how stakeholders can contribute to shaping the plan.

GAPs are essentially map-based management plans that provide focus and direction for the running and improvement of open spaces. They provide a clear, logical process to determine the activities that should take place over a stated period of time to achieve the objectives for the site.

The GAP is being produced by the Countryside Management Service (CMS), part of Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside and Rights of Way Service, on behalf of and in partnership with East Herts District Council. The completed document will inform the management actions to be undertaken over the next five years, commencing in April 2023. The objectives outlined within the GAP aim to align with criteria set out to meet the Green Flag Award.

Engaging communities is integral to the production of GAPs, to ensure that stakeholders are fully aware of and able to interact with the plan production process. This briefing document initiates and supports this community engagement.

The engagement period will run from 25th July to the 11th September 2022. A further engagement period in Winter 2022 will provide an opportunity to assess the draft version of the GAP. Please use the contact details in Section 6 to comment on the aspirations for the site.

This document has been broken down into easy to read sections:

Section 2 provides an overview of the site and location map.

Section 3 reviews recent management of the site.

Section 4 contains the core objectives for the 2023 - 28 GAP.

Section 5 summarises the public engagement methodology, setting out how and when stakeholders can contribute to the plan.

2. BACKGROUND

Southern Country Park is a 23 hectare (56 acre) public greenspace, located on the outskirts of Bishop's Stortford. The site is owned by East Herts District Council (EHDC) and managed in partnership with the Countryside Management Service (CMS) and a dedicated Friends Group (Friends of Southern Country Park – FoSCP). Originally created alongside the St Michael's Mead residential development it was taken over by East Herts District Council in 2001. Under this management partnership the site has been successful in achieving the prestigious Green Flag Award since 2008.

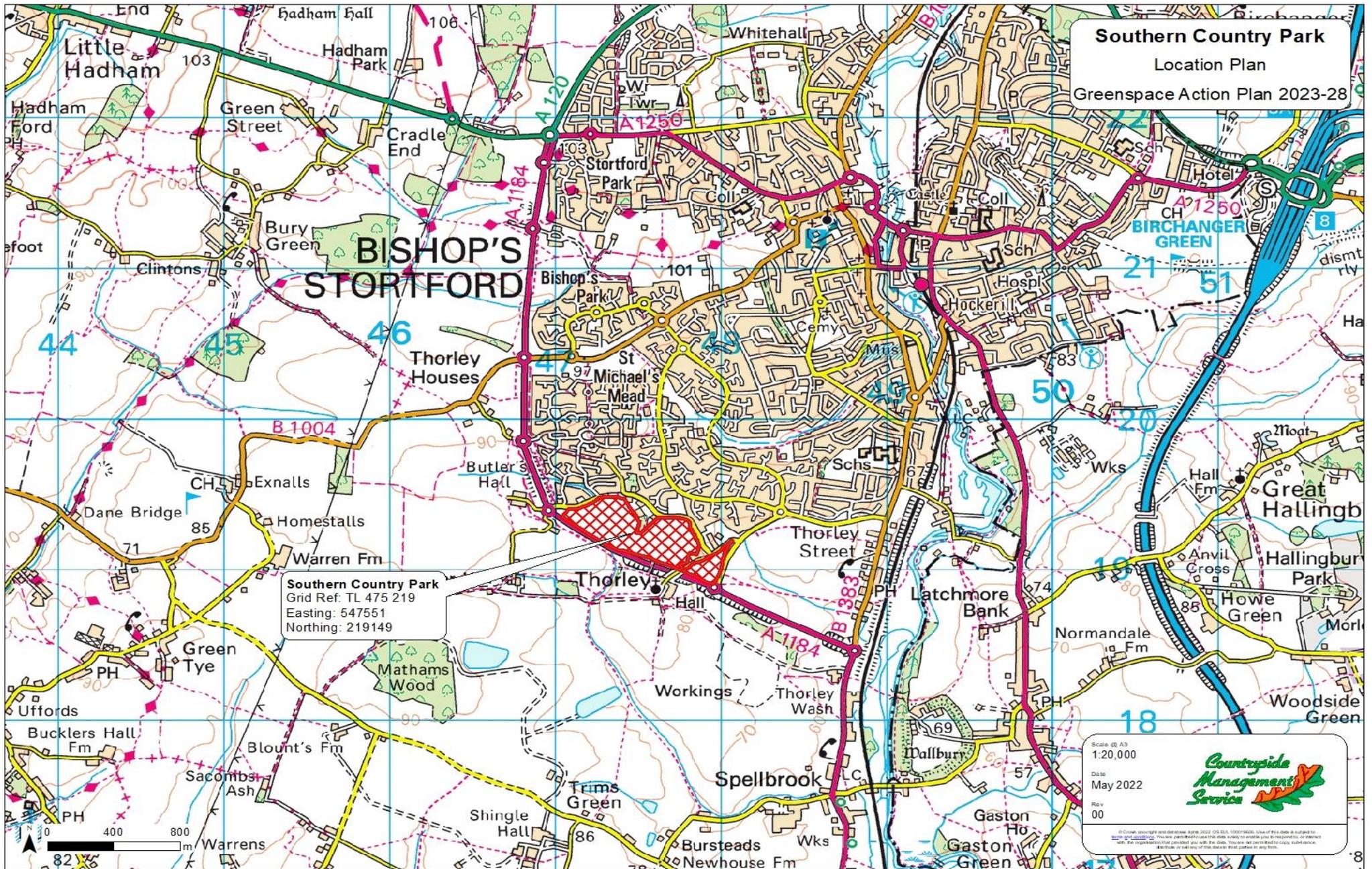
Southern Country Park has a distinct country park feel and is a popular and highly valued recreational space for the local community. The lake is the focal feature for the park and there is a good-sized space suited to recreation which includes a children's play area, junior football pitches, a dog agility course and free public carpark. Additionally, the park has a permanent orienteering course, a dog free picnic area containing a mown maze, several hidden geocaches, and is host to regular Health Walks.

As well as a space for people it is also a haven for wildlife with a mosaic of different habitats including woodland plantations, hedgerows, grassland, streams and wetlands. The natural areas support a range of species including wetland birds, a variety of dragonflies and beetles and a good number of butterflies which are regularly monitored by members of the FoSCP. Annually the site exhibits a diverse display of wildflowers, and 3 species of orchid can be found throughout.

The FoSCP are a group of local people who are great ambassadors for the park. They carry out a large portion of the non-routine management of the park including the woodland, reedbed and grassland areas. The activities they undertake are a valuable contribution to the maintenance and development of a fantastic local facility and the passion they have for the site is shown through their work.



Photo courtesy of FoSCP



3. REVIEW OF PROGRESS

Several previous action plans have been produced for Southern Country Park with the most recently produced covering 2018-2023.

The initial 2008-2013 plan for the young park looked to improve public access by upgrading signage, seating, and footpaths alongside a major wetland restoration project. It was during this time that FoSCP were formed.

A second GAP was developed for the period between 2013 and 2018 and aimed to maintain the high standards achieved in the park. This included the construction of an easy access boardwalk, a viewing area and fishing platforms on the lake as well as significant hedgerow planting along sections of the park boundary.

Southern Country Park is now coming to the end of its third GAP for 2018-2023. This also focused on the ongoing maintenance of the park and it is now in good condition with a range of facilities. In this GAP the woodland plantations had reached an age suitable to begin management so to aid this the FoSCP undertook a series of scalloped coppicing and some light thinning. To highlight this good work there were several interpretation panels installed for both the woodland and the reedbed. Despite this the woodlands are still dark, with little understory below the canopy. Further selective thinning of the plantations will improve light levels reaching the ground and promote growth of ground flora as well as providing space for individual trees to grow broad as they mature.

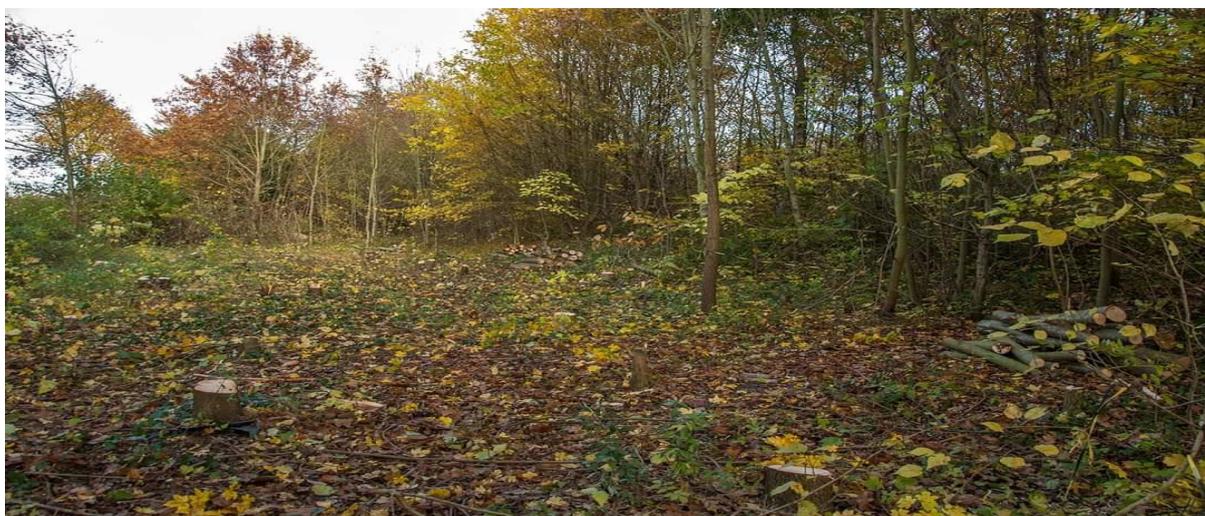


Photo courtesy of FoSCP

As part of the previous plan several standard trees were planted around the park including some disease resistant elms. Mostly these have established well, especially the elms, but others have suffered from a lack of water and will require replacement. There remain further opportunities for standard planting around the under-utilised areas of the park to provide areas of shade as impressive future specimen trees.

The grounds maintenance regime and safety monitoring continue to be of a high standard making the park an attractive place to visit. As part of the maintenance the playpark underwent an upgrade and expansion and now better meets the needs of a variety of age groups. There were further path improvements including the creation of a new pond within one of the plantations which aims to collect rainwater runoff from a previously problematic area. While many of the issues have been solved there are still parts of the path network which accumulate heavy amounts of rain and mud impacting on users.

The grassland habitats were expanded over the course of the previous GAP by moving more areas into a conservation cut and lift programme. This included alongside the woodland plantations and the lower end of the recreation space being turned into a rich wildflower meadow.



Photos courtesy of FoSCP

These conservation cut and lift areas now support a much higher diversity of plants and insects throughout the park and makes up a significant portion of the grass on site.

The management of the grassland however can be improved as it has started to lose some of the species diversity previously seen, with more delicate wildflowers overtaken by grasses and nettle. This is most apparent in parts of the chalk bank and grazing compartment, with the latter becoming regularly overtaken by scrub and requiring intensive management. All grassland areas will benefit from a review of their management which will be supported by an NVC botanical survey for across the site. This survey will allow any management programmes to be subsequently monitored for improvement by future surveys. The grazing compartment as part of the GAP process will have a further review looking into its previous management, the issues that are occurring and how to proceed in future to best enhance the park and what is a vital area of biodiversity.

The lake continues to be popular with anglers and the new platforms and board walk are popular with all users of the park. The fish stocks within the lake are continuing to improve to include a wider variety of species, although some action to improve age diversity is required. There have been ongoing issues with poaching and the removal of mature fish into the nearby wildlife pond. The local police have been engaging with water bailiffs, angling groups and the community to combat the issue of poaching and Aquamaintain, an aquatic habitat management company, routinely remove fish from the adjacent pond with some success.

The reedbed continues to be a vital area for wildlife in the park and the rotational management has been a success. There has been some scrub encroachment from the surrounding willow which is removed as part of the annual cut. In 2021 a more intensive approach was carried out by Aquamaintain to remove and treat a number of these willows. Some areas of open water through the reedbed have seen encroachment by which can negatively affect the species which rely on this feature and should be reopened as part of the reedbed management programme.

The ponds on site remain a great wildlife resource and each one is unique in its makeup. The work to the wildlife pond to improve the surrounding platform has made it a pleasant space to visit. However, there is still potential for further improvements to both this pond and to the created dew pond in the recreation ground, allowing it to hold water for a longer period of the year.

4. GREENSPACE ACTION PLAN (GAP) 2018-2023

The Southern Country Park GAP 2023-28 will be a simple, easy to read plan for use by officers of East Herts District Council, and members of the public, and will act as a guide to the work of volunteers. The plan will be largely map based, with sequential, annual management maps to show the actions planned for each year. The resulting change will be represented on the map for the following year. The document will be reviewed annually to ensure it remains effective and relevant.

The plan will be costed, and potential funding sources identified. Once the final GAP is agreed, external funding will be sought to enable the plan to be delivered.

The aim and objectives of the GAP will be as follows:

Aims

The aim of the SCP is to continue to maintain the park as an attractive and enjoyable open space for people to visit while enhancing the habitats found throughout.

Objectives

A. A Welcoming Place – To provide a welcoming setting for visitors.

- A1 Expand the carpark allowing for users from further afield to utilise the park.
- A2 Maintain site entrances to form an inviting gateway and positive first impression of the park.
- A3 Implementing named areas of the park to aid navigation and create a sense of familiarity.
- A4 Installing signage to direct new users through the park to named locations.

B. Healthy Safe and Secure – To ensure that visitors to the park feel safe.

- B1 Routine safety inspections carried out with identified actions implemented.
- B2 Proactive response to antisocial use and ongoing engagement with police to tackle concerns.
- B3 Create a safer entrance and exit for cars onto the site.

B4 Identify and improve surfacing problems on the paths throughout the park.

C. Well-Maintained and Clean – To ensure the site is tidy and that regular maintenance is carried out.

C1 Improve drainage on problem areas of path network.

C2 Implement actions identified in structural reports on the board walk and fishing platforms carried out by Aquamaintain.

C3 Ensure grounds maintenance of the park is carried out to the highest standard.

D. Sustainability – Ensure all activities on site are as sustainable as possible.

D1 Secure external funding to ensure the viability of capital projects.

D2 Ensure that ongoing maintenance costs are financially sustainable.

D3 Management operations to meet EHDC Environmental Sustainability Action Plan.

D4 Retain material from woodland works on site where possible for use in habitat creation and path maintenance.

E. Biodiversity, Landscape and Heritage – Maintain and enhance the habitats on site.

E1 Undertake a planned programme of woodland management works to diversify the structure and age of the woodland plantations.

E2 Carry out management of the planted hedgerows around the park including laying sections to fill gaps and prolong their life.

E3 Review grassland management practices throughout the site to create more diverse habitats throughout all seasons.

E4 Complete annual reedbed cut to stimulate areas of new growth and retain areas of open water.

E5 Enhance existing ponds on site to improve their value for wildlife.

E6 Monitor and record improvements to Southern Country Park's habitats and wildlife.

E7 Review the usage of the grazing compartment and investigate alternative management of the area.

F. Community Involvement – Communicate and involve the local community with the site and the activities taking place.

F1 Work in partnership with and provide support to the ongoing efforts of the FoSCP volunteer group.

F2 Encourage community and volunteer involvement in practical conservation tasks.

F3 Engage the local community at every stage of the GAP consultation process.

G. Marketing and Communication – Raise awareness of the site and what it has to offer.

G1 Seek to maintain Green Flag accreditation for the park.

G2 Continue to develop and promote a range of events and activities with partners, key stakeholders, and the community to raise awareness of the park.

G3 Promote interest in the park and the work of FoSCP across a variety of media and events such as Love Parks.



Photo courtesy of FoSCP

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PLAN PRODUCTION PROCESS

Effective community engagement is at the centre of successful management plans. The value of a GAP is maximised when it incorporates and balances the aspirations of stakeholders and interest groups.

In order to provide all interested stakeholders and groups with the opportunity to feed into the production of the new GAP, we have adopted a structured two-stage approach to community engagement.

- For the first stage (this briefing document), stakeholders and site users will be invited to make comment on the core aspirations in Section 4; it is hoped that any further aspirations and/or issues will be identified through this information gathering process. This first stage of community engagement will run between **Monday 25th July and Sunday 11th September 2022.**
- For the second stage, stakeholders and site users will be invited to read through and make comment on the draft GAP, which will include the detailed proposals and actions. This stage is intended to run in the Autumn. To support this stage, we will be holding a guided walk and engagement session for any users or interested groups that may wish to discuss the proposals or a particular aspect in more detail. The arrangements for this event will be confirmed and advertised nearer the time.

Following the second stage exercise, the final document will be produced, published and the actions will commence.

Please be aware that we will not respond individually to comments received through the public engagements; instead, we will produce a summary of comments, noting any amendments made to the plan as a result. This engagement response document will be published online alongside the briefing document, draft plan and final plan. We will retain contact details only for the purpose of keeping respondents informed about the plan development process.

5.1 Greenspace Action Plan production process

1. Production of briefing document and outline proposals.
2. Stakeholder engagement on briefing document. Engagement will run from approximately Monday 25th July and Sunday 11th September 2022.
3. Production of draft GAP.
4. Stakeholder engagement on draft GAP. Engagement will run during the autumn for 4 weeks.
5. Production of final GAP.
6. Publicity and promotion.

5.2 Stakeholders

- Bishops Stortford Town Council
- Thorley Parish Council
- East Herts Council Portfolio Holder & Local Councillors
- Hertfordshire County Council & District Councillors
- Relevant HCC and EHDC officers
- Friends of Southern Country Park
- Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- St Michaels Mead Residents Association
- Hertfordshire Ecology
- Historic Environment Record
- Ramblers Society
- British Horse Society
- Thorley Manor Residents Association
- St Michaels Mead Residents Association
- BUPA Premier Court Care Home
- Regiment Fitness
- St Barnabas Centre
- Park Users and Local Residents

6. STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Thank you for taking the time to read this document. We are keen to receive feedback from you on our proposals for the Southern Country Park Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) 2023-2028.

Please return your comments using the contact details below by **Sunday 11th September** at the latest.

FAO

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